The queen’s descent

I

The hot afternoon sun beat down on the sandy desert road. A dozen or so horses carried their riders down the pathway to their home city state in the south. The riders were covered in leathery battle armor, carried their swords close and wore their protective cloaks over their bodies in an attempt to shield at least some of the heat away.

A harsh overseer was the sun. It whipped and beat all under it until midday then continued to gloat well into the afternoon. While its heat whelps continued to sting like open sores, the sun blocked all thought of tomorrow or the day after that. It would have done no good to tell these weary soldiers that their many times great grandchildren would be the founding fathers of Sumer. No, their only concern was for the here and now of their harsh, unforgiving lives.

With one exception being their leader. Inana, queen of the Apsu people, surveyed the road ahead with dark stormy eyes. She, her sister Ereshkigal, and her brother Utu ruled their city with an iron hand and an eye to the future. It had to be, for from the moment of their births, these people had been theirs. Her role, her only role, was to protect them from the frequent attacks by bandits who would steal their food and kill their children.

Such a raid had drawn them out of their city’s protective walls this morning. Bandits had been hitting the fields that surrounded the main dwellings and grew food for all. Inana, her handmaiden Ninshabar, and her bodyguard, Tammuz, led the counter charge. They had found an entire battalion of the bandits and slaughtered them to the last man. Now, they returned battered, but triumphant. Inana offered a prayer of thanks to the gods for another day alive.

Her people worshipped a pantheon of gods as harsh as the world itself, but not above sharing their favor with those who served them faithfully. In the beginning, so the priests said, there had only been the fresh and salty waters, churning in and out of each other endlessly. From them had come forth Apsu, god of the fresh water who gave her people their name, and Tiamet, his spouse and goddess of the saltier water. They became parents, grandparents and finally great grandparents of many gods, including Enlil, god of the wind, and Ea, craftsman and eventual creator of humanity.

Then Apsu and Tiamet had fought against their clamoring children. The parents were slain, and the gods fashioned the world from their mother Tiamet's body and men to serve them. Inana's people in particular served Enlil's son, Sin, god of the moon, and his brother Nergal, god of plague and the underworld. Of course, Nergal was admittedly served out of fear more than love. Sin, on the other hand, was genuinely thanked for the soothing darkness that came after day.

Of course, her sister was the most religious of the three. She was the youngest, and the favorite of their mother, the former queen. She had been brought up to be the high priestess while the eldest and only son, Utu, had been their father's favorite and the heir apparent for kingship. Inana had been the middle child, loved by both parents but not particularly favored by either.

She had had reverence for the gods, but only scorn and contempt for soft romantic feelings that some worshippers had for them or for their mates. Instead, she had joined her brother and father on their fighting and hunting missions, and forged her own way. When their parents had died, the three siblings had agreed to share power jointly.

Tammuz rode up, stirring Inana out of her musings. “My queen, look ahead to the left,” he told

her.

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Inana did, and saw a cloud of smoke rising nearby. The smell of burning wood and straw wafted under her cloak into her nostrils.

“More of them?” She cursed. “They think they can steal while we are away?”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Come! There are still those who would live to challenge us.”

Despite their fatigue, the warriors cheered, and followed as she and Tammuz galloped forward to the smoke. All their lives were a struggle, a struggle against the land, a struggle against hunger, and a struggle against enemies. Any chance to strike back at it all gave them a renewed sense of power and purpose. They could indeed do something to affect their lives. With the gods’ blessing, of course.

Inana surveyed the situation as they approached. A small farmhouse was burning to the ground quickly in the dry afternoon. Four brigands could be seen. Two patrolled on their horses, one was loading wheat onto a wagon, and one was brandishing his sword in front of the hapless farmer.

Riding quickly, she pulled out her sword, charged the first brigand, and sliced cleanly through his neck before he could bring his sword up. Tammuz, however, wasted no time on elegance in his attack. He rode his horse over to the loader, and savagely trampled him. The dying man drew a knife, and wildly slashed upward at the horse’s belly. Both horse and victim screamed out their dying breath, and Tammuz was thrown from his horse.

The two mounted brigands rode forward to meet the attackers. One threw his spear at Inana, who ducked out of its way. Unfortunately, it hit another of her warriors, who fell off his horse, instantly dead.

Inana raised her sword, and rode forward. The brigand pulled out a sword of

his own, and they exchanged blows as they rode by each other. Although stunned, neither fell.

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The brigand circled back, and prepared to strike again. Inana pulled onto her horse's reigns, slowing the beast. Her horse neighed fiercely, and reared up, kicking its feet. The brigand hesitated, and then slowed his horse to a stop. The two looked at each other for a second. Out of the corner of her eye, Inana watched more of her men cut down the other horseman. Then, the Apsu warriors rode towards their queen and her opponent, forming a circle of panting horses.

The bandit looked around wildly, afraid, knowing his life would be forfeit. Desperately, he jumped down and raised his sword at Inana, challenging her to single combat. Inana felt a flash of respect for the man, and his courage.

Respect, however, didn't translate into mercy. Jumping down, she returned his challenge by raising her own sword. Then she rushed forward, and exchanged several blows. It didn't last long, as

the man's fear made him sloppy. He flailed wildly, and Inana easily brought down her blade on his wrist.

The man howled, and dropped to the ground, clutching a bleeding stump. Tammuz hobbled forward, and drew the man to his feet.

"You are unhurt, Tammuz?" Inana asked, sheathing her sword.

"Yes, my queen," he replied, pinning the thief's remaining hand behind his

back. "Only bruised." Inana nodded and glanced at her foe. She drew aside

her cloak so the man could see her face.

Dark skinned with coal black hair and eyes, Inana was neither beautiful nor ugly. The only striking feature she had was the fire behind her gaze, which she now turned on her beaten enemy.

“Who else is with you?” she demanded.

The man didn’t answer. Inana held out her hand, and beckoned. One of her men went to the burning house. Reaching out, he pulled out a burning plank, and gave it to his queen.

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Inana struck the bandit's face with it, leaving a blistering burn in its wake. The man screamed again, and Inana signaled for Tammuz to let him go. The man crumpled, and Inana spat on him.

"Take that message back to your masters, dog," she told him. "The Apsu people protect their own."

She signaled again, and her men parted, allowing the man to stagger away. He yelled curses at her, but she paid him no heed, instead turning her attention to the farmer, who had witnessed everything in silence.

He was about forty, neither young nor yet old, although his skin didn't look near as leathery as that of most men his age. Despite looking strong, he also appeared to not have spent much time outside. Indeed, the mild look of horror on his face only seemed to confirm that.

Tammuz walked up to stand beside her and face the farmer. "You live within Apsu borders," he told them. "That means you are the subject of Inana." he pointed to his queen. "Bow down in gratitude, for she has saved you."

"For that, I am thankful," the man said, dropping to one knee. "I, Atrahasis am your humble servant," he said.

Inana looked around. "Your farm is destroyed," she said. "We will take your remaining crops into the city. In return, you will be allowed to come with us."

"Of course, majesty," Atrahasis replied.

She signaled for her handmaiden. "Ninshabar, take Atrahasis on your horse. You," she pointed to another soldier. "Take the wagon."

She mounted her horse as her instructions were obeyed. Atrahasis got a look at her handmaiden, whose own cloak had come loose from the fighting. His eyes widened slightly and he quickly made an effort to compose himself. For despite the unflattering clothing and layer of dust over her skin, Ninshabar was exceedingly beautiful. Long dark tresses framed a sweet oval face with a high forehead and rich black eyes. She had been Inana's servant since they both had been children, for her mother had found her as an orphan and given her to her middle child in an attempt to encourage Inana to have more female friends and interests, rather than spend her time with the men. Instead, Ninshabar had often been mistaken for a blood member of the royal family due to her appearance and soft demeanor. Sometimes Inana felt a pang of envy, but Ninshabar knew her place and had been a faithful servant.

Shortly afterwards, the party resumed their journey towards the city of Apsu.

II

By the late afternoon, the city appeared on the horizon. Rows and rows of two story brick and stone houses were arranged in neat streets around a central ziggurat that doubled both as royal palace and a temple to Sin. The houses all followed the same basic plan. Three or four common or storage rooms were arranged about a central courtyard on the lower level. The upper levels of the houses

contained the bedrooms for the people who didn't simply sleep on their roofs, weather permitting.

Although most houses had small gardens in their courtyards, most food was grown or raised by loyal Apsu farmers and shepherds living outside the city walls. Within Apsu proper, most of the citizens were either soldiers or guards, although

there were also many artisans and wise men within the temple. Metalworking, however, was still a new science and Inana had to rely on distant merchants who kept their trade secrets well guarded.

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Although she didn't know it, the several thousand people she ruled made up a significant part of the beginning human race.

One day, there will be more of us, Inana thought. One day we will grow and expand and the struggles against hunger and fear will abate. Then there will be new races of men, descendants unlike us in body and mind. Perhaps all could learn to read and write. Perhaps all could be wise and creative, building and discovering wonders every moment. One day, gods willing.

For that was Inana's dream. To guide all her people to greatness. It consumed every moment of her time, and virtually all thought. Although her relationship with Tammuz occasionally took a romantic turn, she had had no time to take a husband or engage in leisure activities. She did know how to write cuneiform, the wedge shaped writing of her people, but only rarely got to read outside of official worship services.

The sound of horns playing could be heard as they approached. Most of the citizens would be in the temple now, to sing praises to Sin and hear tidings of their returning queen's victories.

The sentries at the gate recognized them, and gave a shout. Inana slowed her horse as the gate opened for her. Her guards bowed as Inana led her party through.

They rode to the central temple and dismounted. Walking in the open door, they found themselves in a large audience hall. On either side rows and rows of dark, dusty people looked intently at the late arrivals to their service.

Inana took out her sword, and raised it in the air in triumph. The people

cheered, and bowed their heads as Inana’s party walked down the aisle to the dais at the far wall.

It felt good to be home, among friends and subjects. Inana felt a renewed sense of resolve. She would do anything to ensure their success. Anything.

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Standing in front of the statue of Sin were her siblings: Utu, stolid captain of the city guard, and Ereshkigal, her sister and high priestess. Ereshkigal stepped forward, and raised her hands to the sky.

“The sun sets, and the moon, our lord Sin, returns for another night,” Ereshkigal cried out. “He gives us rest from the day and decrees that we shall see another. Give thanks!”

The people did, as Inana motioned her party to stand in the front row. Then she climbed the steps onto the dais, clasped her sister’s hands, and turned to face the crowd.

“Today, more of those who would cause us harm will see the moon tonight with dead eyes.” People clapped and shouted, and Inana brandished her sword once more before sheathing it. “However, be aware that it is not over until every last one of them is dead.”

The cheering died away as the people grew more thoughtful and intent. Inana knew she had to walk the fine line between warning and frightening. But she had spoken to them plenty of times before. They would follow her lead.

“Training will need to be increased to every afternoon as well as in the morning. I know that will be in the heat of the day, but the brigands can attack at any time. We must be ready to meet them in any circumstance.

“Today I saw evidence that their number may be more than we had thought. They may well prepare for a larger attack. If that happens, we will be ready and we will triumph.”

She looked around at the crowd. Tammuz looked at her in awe. Atrahasis bore a more cynical look on his ageing face. Her other soldiers grimly nodded, never shirking their duty.

> “We will triumph,” she repeated. “I want to hear you all say it. We will triumph.”

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“We will triumph,” the crowd recited, though not as forceful as Inana would have wished.

Clearly, they thought of the days overhead.

“We will triumph. As one now,”

Inana said. “We will triumph.”

“Again.”

As they said it, some of them straightened up, and spoke more loudly. This had an effect on the others around them. Soon, the chant grew to that of a strong, unified people. The people Inana knew they could be. Her people.

“We will triumph! We will triumph! We will triumph!”

Shortly afterwards, the citizens began to file out and return to their homes. Inana turned to her siblings. “We need to talk,” she told them. “To make preparations.”

“My queen,” Atrahasis spoke up. Inana turned and saw him coming onto the dais, “What do you wish of me?”

“I suppose you could go to the guards and ask to join their training,” she said, absently. She honestly hadn’t given it much thought. “Unless, of course, you are one of the wise men, such as Enki.”

Atrahasis swallowed. While he didn’t want to admit knowing of Enki, he felt he did owe Inana his life. “If it pleases your majesty, I was once an apprentice to Enki.”

Inana raised her eyebrows. “Is this

true?” “It is.”

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Inana looked back at her siblings, and they nodded. “Very well. Come with me and we will

talk.”

They ascended to the highest levels of the ziggurat. Here were the rulers’ private chambers and meeting rooms. In one of these, cushions were brought out and Inana reclined with her siblings.
Atrahasis sat on another cushion opposite, while Tammuz stood at the door to listen.

“You have, I’m quite sure, heard of Enki, my lords,” Atrahasis began. “Merchants from afar bring his armor and weapons. He is the most skilled craftsman the world has ever known.

“But there is more to it than that. Enki wishes to join no kingdom, to bow before no one. So he and his followers live in the mountains, and make their home in a ruin.”

“So I’ve heard,” Inana replied. “And you were there?”

“Yes. The place is the last remnant of a forgotten age, the time before the great flood when the gods punished mankind for disobeying them. It is said that in the pits below the ruin are secrets not
meant for man. Secrets of life, death, and life

beyond death.” “What did you see?” she

asked.

“Very little. Enki himself saw more. I speak the truth,” he said, when Tammuz

stepped forward. “Perhaps Enki forgot to teach you respect,” he warned.

“It’s all right, Tammuz,” Inana said. “Simply saying what I don’t wish to hear isn’t insolence.” She looked pointedly at Atrahasis. “Within reason, that is.”

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“Respect, your majesty?” he said. “Enki has none. Do you want to know why I left him? He reached a point where he declared openly that the gods are not worthy of worship. That right and wrong were lies and that man should only do what was pleasurable.”

Atrahasis shook his head. “I tell you, Enki is a heretic. One day the gods will smite him if they have not already. I will never return to him, lest I be smitten as well.”

“Sir, my sister isn’t showing it, but we are desperate,” Ereshkigal spoke up. “Our men are strong, but not strong enough if all the brigands band together to launch a single assault. If your Enki has knowledge, or even a cache of weapons, it could mean the difference between victory and defeat.”

“Forgive me, majesties,” Atrahasis said. “I am grateful for my life being saved, but you don’t want Enki. He is a friend to no one.”

Ereshkigal stood up. “Then we have to take our

last resort.” “What do you mean?” Inana asked.

“I mean invoke the gods more directly than we ever have before.” She pulled out a satchel on her belt, and pulled out four strange medallions. The center part was an opal, carved in the shape of a crescent moon. Inana recognized them as gifts she had made for her sister the last festival.

“Once, in my prayer and meditation, I felt another presence. The presence directed me to take these medallions, and to enchant them with an incantation that the presence gave me. I call them the Eyes of Sin. With them, I feel the presence of the spirits more strongly than ever.

“I believe I have been in contact with the brother of Sin. Nergal, god of the underworld and sickness, could strike a thousand dead.”

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“Your highness, no!” Atrahasis cried, standing up himself now. “Surely you don’t wish to draw his attention?”

“Sister, it is said Nergal cannot be summoned without it also causing harm to the very people who summon him,” Inana agreed. She wouldn’t have thought that her own sister, a priestess of the moon no less, would risk joining with Sin’s fearsome brother.

“We live to protect our people at all costs,” Ereshkigal argued. “You know this. Do you think I’ve not thought long and hard about the danger? I promise that I would only do something like this as a last resort. But what if that time does come?”

“Surely there is another way,” Atrahasis insisted.

“You are a strange one,” Ereshkigal said. “First you condemn Enki for not respecting the gods, but then you refuse to petition them?”

“Blasphemy is one thing,” Atrahasis retorted. “Calling forth the more evil gods is another.”

“Well then?” Inana spoke up. She saw a chance to get more cooperation from him before his guard went back up. “Can you take us to Enki to change my sister’s mind?”

“I will not go back,” he answered. “But if you are determined, I will write up a map to Enki’s house.”

Inana and Ereshkigal looked at each other.

“I will not call on the gods unless forced to,” Ereshkigal said. “Do not think me casual or irresponsible. I was bred for this, just as Inana is to fight.”

“To protect,” Inana corrected. “Very well then. Atrahasis will draw the map. Ereshkigal and Utu will remain here to guard against any further attacks. Then in the morning, I will head for Enki’s house.”

III

The morning sun rose over the sand and rocks as a desert wind gently blew in the faces of Inana and Ninshabar. After an early breakfast and blessing from Ereshkigal for Sin to guide them, they had headed out.

Tammuz and a half dozen others rode behind them. They had with them three chests of gold to pay Enki for his services. Inana felt a giddiness that she hadn’t felt in a long time. To meet the master craftsman, said to be one of the wisest and noblest of men. Indeed, if Atrahasis was wrong and if he could be persuaded to join them, he could train a thousand men to build up the city. Perhaps he did need protection out here, alone, where no other civilized men dwelt.

“Happiness isn’t possible in this world,” Inana mused, looking out over the terrain. “At best, we can only have satisfaction that we met our challenges and met them well. Beyond that,” she shrugged and looked ahead at the barren terrain. “Perhaps the gods have something more for us when we die. Who knows?”

She pulled out the tablet. “Let us see. We head for the southern portion of those mountains.”

On the edge of the horizon was a dot that signaled where they were headed. They wouldn’t arrive today. Another hot day in the desert then, but if Atrahasis’ map was right, then Enki’s compound lay in a mountain pass near there.

A day and a night passed before they stood at the foothills of the mountain. A very narrow trail could be seen between the rocks, so narrow that their horses had to pass through single file. Picking their way through the rocks, they saw at last a sheer rock wall. Carved into this was an elaborate doorway and windows from where Inana saw sentries carrying spears.

The wall, while relatively simple, was unlike anything Inana had ever seen. She felt that she was on the edge of her familiar world. Whatever lay ahead, would be as wondrous as it was unknown.

She slowly rode forward and cried in a loud voice.

“Hail Enki! Come forth; we mean no harm. I, Inana of Apsu, would do business with you. I came bearing gold.”

The sentries pointed her spears at

her. “Stand where you are,” one

called out.

Inana waited until the front gate opened. A man came out, and saluted her. She took care to make no threatening moves as he approached, remembering that the compound wished to remain neutral.

“You are Enki?” she asked.

The man shook his head. “I am Ninurta, his steward, and one of his sons. What do you wish of

Enki?”

“As many of his swords and armor as this will buy.”

She gestured, and her party approached, heads down and weapons out of their hands. Above them, the sentries looked about nervously to ensure that no one else approached.

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They dismounted and slowly walked towards their queen. At Inana's command, they opened the three boxes. The steward reached in, pulled out a few gold pieces, and inspected them.

Ninurta nodded. "It is well. Come."

He beckoned, and walked back inside. Inana ordered two men to stay with the horses. The rest entered through the door.

Within was an anteroom with a table containing bread and water. Ninurta bade them sit down, and signaled for other servants to take the gold.

Inana looked around and saw the stairways on either side of the door that led to the guard posts she had seen. On the left side of the table was a kitchen where women came and went, replenishing the food as she and her men sat and ate.

Inana noted that all the women were beautiful and none looked elderly. Tall and short, thin and full figured, their ages ranged from adolescence to early middle age. While nothing of this should've seemed amiss, Inana felt a slight unclean feeling, as if having obscenity paraded in front of her. Perhaps it was due to the somewhat revealing cut of their dresses.

"The gold will buy about thirty armored suits and accompanying swords," Ninurta remarked as he sat at the table himself to eat. "Enough to fortify your officers, perhaps, but not enough to raise an army."

"It is well," Inana said. "Will your men load it onto carts for us?"

"We will, and will send our people back to your city if you protect them. We have done so before, and do not fear bandits on the return journey. They do not attack the empty handed."

“I shall,” Inana promised. “But tell me, might I speak with Enki himself? I have travelled far, and have heard of his great wisdom.”

Ninurta frowned and shook his head. “Forgive me, queen Inana, but we do not share our secrets with outsiders.”

He gestured to his right, and Inana felt a warm breeze from a guarded doorway at the end of that wall. She heard the crackling of fires and the blows of hammers as the unseen artisans plied their trade.

“That is our livelihood,” the steward continued. “Without the gifts of gold and food as payment, we would not be able to remain here. We would be at the mercy of any ruthless warlord or thief.”

He smiled slightly. “Present company excepted, of course.”

Inana doubted that last remark was genuine, but let it pass. “I respect your position,” she told him. “But that is not what I seek. I merely wish to meet Enki, and hear his knowledge on the world in general.”

Ninurta considered, and then nodded. “I will speak to him at once.”

He stood and walked through a third door at the farthest end of the room. A few minutes later, he poked his head back through and nodded.

Inana, Ninshabar, and Tammuz walked in and down a darkened hall. The first thing they all noticed was a foul musty odor that clung to the damp air. The temperature cooled and Inana could tell they were going deeper into the mountain. Rotted doors lined the hallway, and the only lights were grimy torches flickering in the darkness.

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A brighter light was visible at the end of the hallway. There was no doorway, so they all entered the presence of Enki.

Inana blinked in surprise. At first, all she saw was a mound of soft pillows in the middle of the circular room. Larger torches surrounded the perimeter. As her eyes adjusted to the brighter light, she saw that two of the beautiful women were relining there. One held a chalice of wine over the center of the cushions.

A fleshy but wrinkled and spotted hand reached up to accept the beverage. Inana heard messy, slurping sounds as the hand lowered it back into the pillows.

Ninurta called out in a loud voice. “My lord and father, queen Inana of Apsu.”

From the soft mass, a grizzled old body staggered to its feet. Inana gaped at the sight of the legendary craftsman.

Enki was at least in his seventies, if not eighties. Dressed in a loose robe like garment, his arms and chest were just as withered as the hand that gripped the already empty chalice. His head was nearly bald; only a few wisps of white hair could be seen around his large crusted ears. While she saw a glimmer of intelligence in the brown eyes, they were glazed over with drunkenness, despite the early hour.

Revulsion gripped Inana as she stared into the ugly, weather-beaten face. For it wasn’t that Enki was merely old. That was no surprise; he had been well known for years and very few young men could be called wise. No, there was a wasted, decaying quality in that face and those eyes. She felt that she gazed not on a man, but on the degenerate and pathetic remnant of a man.

“So,” Enki began, approaching them unsteadily. “I understand that you wish for my advice.

What would you have me say? And what is your price?”

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Before Inana could reply, he turned his attention to the stunned Ninshabar. A gleam entered his dull eyes, and he smiled, revealing a mouth of yellowed, snaggly teeth. He leaned in closer, to get a

better look at the handmaiden's lovely face. Ninshabar avoided his gaze, but couldn't ignore the mingled odor of alcohol and mire.

"Oh yes," he whispered. Then he grabbed her hair, brought it to his nose,

and sniffed audibly. Ninshabar cried out in surprise and disgust. She pulled

away, and Enki smiled at Inana.

"For her, I will give you any council you seek. My house…is at your disposal."

"Ninshabar is my servant, lord," Inana replied, appalled. "With respect, she is no gift."

Enki's face fell. "No?" he said. "But perhaps you don't know the rules of my house? I give nothing, only sell. If not a lovely woman or fine wine, what will you pay me?"

Inana's eyes narrowed. It was only the basic rules of hospitality and courtesy for elders that

didn't keep her from striking him and storming out. Still, surely he had some wisdom left after all these years. He had built this operation and explored the secrets of this place, had he not?

Slowly, she reached around her neck and took off a gold necklace. She gave it to him, and he took it with some residual disappointment. Enki looked it over in his hands, shrugged, and fastened it around the young woman at his side.

"That will buy a day or so of my knowledge," he agreed. "But not today. My

steward will send your men back with your weapons purchase. If you wish, you may stay behind for another day. Go; you will be cared for until I send for you."

Inana bristled; she typically gave orders, not received them. But the steward drew them away as Enki began caressing his concubine. Perhaps it was better to leave him for now.

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IV

“Are you sure about this, your majesty?” Ninshabar asked.

They stood outside the door watching two wagons leave the mountain through the pass. Most of Inana’s horsemen escorted it; only Tammuz remained with them.

“The others will return to Apsu with the supplies,” Inana replied. “I will speak with Enki about this place before we go.”

“Why your majesty?” Ninshabar insisted. She clearly didn’t want to go back to the old man. Not while those eyes stared up and down her greedily.

“I’m not sure,” Inana admitted. “I just have this feeling that there’s more here. Don’t you feel the oldness of this place, even without Atrahasis’ words? The people who lived here knew things, had powers that we don’t. Somehow, I’m certain of that. I must know if there’s something here that can help protect our city.”

“Maybe the secrets here made Enki what he is,” Ninshabar grumbled.

“I don’t think so. Listen, I will give him two days. After that, if he’s only wasting our time, we will go. Meanwhile, Tammuz will protect you in our guest chamber. I will speak with Enki alone.”

She smiled and bowed her head gratefully. “Thank you, my queen. I am your humble servant.” Inana nodded as Enki’s steward came out to meet them. It was time for her audience.

Enki looked more lucid this morning as Inana sat at a table with him elsewhere in his chambers. He hadn't even poured any wine and contented himself with water instead. Perhaps it was just to keep his head clear while he determined what his warrior guest wanted of him.

"So, I understand that you are curious about my home?" he asked.

"Yes. Several days ago, I saved the life of one Atrahasis. He said that he had served you once." Enki's brow furrowed. "Atrahasis," he repeated. "Yes, I do remember him. We weren't close, but I know all my workers, guards and servants. We live in this wing of the compound together, and there are plenty of rooms for everyone."

He looked down as if to see what was below. "This place was once a great stronghold. In addition to what you've seen so far, there are multiple storerooms underground that have remained untouched for ages."

"Atrahasis had told me as much. Tell me, is there any more you could tell me? Perhaps something you don't sell to other kings and queens?"

Enki's eyes narrowed. "Why?" he asked.

Inana put her outstretched hands on the table in a placating gesture. "I know of your desire for neutrality. I seek not to add you to my kingdom but to protect my people. Bandits roam the deserts, preying on the fringes of my borders. They grow strong and more numerous. My men are brave and strong but…"

She sighed. "I find that I run out of options. It's only a matter of time before I must either invoke the gods or discover men who know magic."

Enki hesitated and Inana wondered if he himself could be a magician, despite his appearance. But he neither confirmed nor denied that he knew any occult magic. Indeed, Inana herself had felt her entire life a mingled fear of and curiosity for such things.

"Then you…love your people?" Enki asked.

Inana shook her head. "I wouldn't put it that way," she admitted. "It is more of a duty. I was born to be a queen. I have fought hard and find that this is who I am. This is who I must be. Without it, I am nothing."

"Hmm. It's good that you don't love," Enki said. "Your heart will never break, even if your

sword one day does. But duty isn't a much better thing. Duty to men, duty to the gods. It has the same sad ending as love, really. You say you are nothing without it, but perhaps you should try to just care for yourself."

He chuckled, and Inana heard bitterness in the laugh. "When I was young, I was not unlike you. Oh, I had no royal blood in my veins, but I trained myself to create new things for the city I was born in. I had a curiosity for all things, and I was good at what I did.

"But I made the mistake you did not. I fell in love. I had a beautiful wife once, very wise, very kind. But then…"

He broke off, and made a hand signal. A servant emerged with a flask of wine. Enki accepted it, took a long drink, and then offered it to Inana. She waved it away, afraid that the old man would actually begin weeping. She had never been good at comforting others.

Luckily, however, his tears had tried long ago, so he continued his story.

“Then one day, she happened to be thrown from a horse. Her wounds festered, and never recovered. The worst thing was the pain. Why the pain? Why, when everything else can fail in our bodies, does our ability to feel pain never cease or exhaust?”

He quickly took another drink. “I prayed and prayed to the gods. After all, I had been pious. I had done the right thing and been faithful to her. I never stole or murdered anyone. They didn’t answer. I had physicians come in. All useless fools who were so afraid of doing the wrong thing that they did nothing but demand a fee. Soon she died. The worst part of it all, the very worst part, was that I had no one to turn to. I tried to tell my troubles to my friends, and share my anguish with the priests.

All any of them could do was tell me that I didn’t have enough faith. That it wasn’t the circumstances that were evil, oh no. I simply had the wrong attitude about it all.”

He growled and threw his cup on the ground, shattering it. “Fools!” he repeated. “Fools who thought they were wise and profound. Fools who thought their berating of me would keep me in the god’s service. Ironic; that just made my faith weaker, not stronger.”

He laughed again, and Inana wondered if he was mad, or simply this embittered.

“That’s when I knew,” he continued after a moment. “I knew that the gods we worship don’t concern themselves with us. All they ask is a minor tribute here and there, and then they leave us alone. Indeed, they didn’t even create the world, just formed out of it, according to the legends.”

“I see why Atrahasis called you a heretic,” Inana replied.

“Is there any real difference between those who serve the gods and those who do not?” Enki countered. “Both say the world just happened. There is no rhyme or reason behind it. The only difference between a high priest and me is that the former will tell me that there is another older race that we should revere.”

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He shook his head. “No. I won’t sing the praises of those who left me when I needed them most. So I searched, queen Inana, I travelled the world gathering those who saw things as I did. We found this place, too remote for most kings to deal with. Here, I make as much money as I can and I take whatever pleasures I will. Who’s to say that I am wrong?”

“I…this wasn’t what I expected when I saw you last night,” Inana confessed.

“You expected the great Enki to be a sorcerer, yes?” He shook his head. “No, my queen, nothing so grand. I don’t think I can give you any advice or help you don’t already have.” He sighed. “Not even for that beautiful maiden of yours.”

Inana thought about his words, and the anger behind them. Anger because he had once had hope and faith. Anger at his own inability to affect what he had loved the most.

She shuddered, understanding now his desire to drown in wine and women. Still, by his own admission, he had been a commoner. He had the luxury of turning his back on his duties; she did not.

“What of the area under the mines?” she asked at last. She had been wanting to see them before Enki’s other talk had distracted her.

“You don’t want to go there,” he replied. “You will find both the answer to your problems and a new one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you want to see?” Enki asked. He stood. “I will take you if you wish; but beware. You might not like what you find.”

He walked out and Inana followed. At last, she saw the chance to learn more. With luck, all the answers lay ahead.

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V

“My lord.”

A soldier addressed Utu, as the warrior was running through his morning exercises back at Apsu. “An emissary is at the gate. He is from the brigands and demands an audience with queen Inana.”

Utu’s head snapped up. “You didn’t tell him she

was away?” “No, my lord.”

“Take me to him, then,” he replied.

The man walked back into the streets towards the city wall. Utu followed, and reached a ladder placed against the inner wall. Climbing it, the two men reached the top where guards with spears were watching the single horseman outside the gate.

Utu squinted to see him, despite being so high up. Though he wouldn’t have known it, he saw none other than the very brigand who had fought his sister. His face had a nasty scar from the burn and he struggled to control his horse with one hand, but he still glared up at them with resolve and hatred.

“Let the queen of this city come forth,” he shouted

up to them. “I am the queen’s brother,” Utu

replied. “I will speak for her.”

“I am Lagoda. Let it be known that my people declare war on hers,” he shouted back. “You think us few and far between. But there are more of us than you know. We will take your land and seal you in that city like birds in a cage.”

Under Utu’s vantage point, several of the guards brandished their spears, ready to strike down the man at their captain’s word. Utu frowned and shouted back.

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“You speak boldly, man. For one who had no home or king.”

“My people follow my lead,” he told them. “Although she wounded me, none have been known to face queen Inana and live.”

“Perhaps you should’ve taken advantage of her mercy, and stayed away,” Utu offered.

“I will stay away if you cede your northern lands to me,” the man replied. “Ours need to eat as well. Give me what I want and perhaps there will be peace.”

“No peace can exist where there is boasting and insolence,” Utu retorted. “Let you and yours come. The Apsu will not relent.”

The man shouted, and turned his horse around. Without another word, he rode away. “Do you think his boasts have any merit?” the other soldier asked.

“I don’t know,” Utu replied. Once the man disappeared over the horizon, he turned to the ladder. “We will inform Ereshkigal. Come.”

Enki led Inana through the section of his home that contained the forges. A large room with a high ceiling and vents to the outside contained several round cisterns, each containing a fire. Men stood over their respective fires, swinging hammers and forging glowing blades.

Fascinated, Inana looked for several moments. She could see that the blades were heated until they were practically melting, and then beaten into shape. The strength and endurance to do this all day under a hot flame impressed her, and she

would have loved to ask Enki more about it.

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Enki, however, was firm in his resolve to keep others from learning how to duplicate his secrets.

He ushered Inana past the forges to a dark doorway at the end of the room.

Finding an old stone stairway, they descended. At the bottom, Inana noted that the compound was unfinished here, and gave way to caverns. On either side of the walls, she saw discarded pickaxes and boulders that had been dug out of the ground.

“What is this?” she asked.

“These stones contain the raw material for the forges,” Enki explained. “We have plenty at the moment, however. This way.”

They walked down the tunnel and made several turns to the right and to the left.

Finally, they came upon another stairway. Going further into the mountain, Inana noted that there were luminescent stones neatly lining the sides and eliminating the need for torches. A soft reddish glow illuminated the steps and staleness greeted her nose and skin.

“There are the catacombs beneath the mines,” Enki said. He shrugged. “Or at least that’s what I call them. What the old men did down there, I cannot say. Only that they delved into matters that

displeased the gods.”

She looked down the stairs, and didn’t see the bottom. “How far must I go?” she asked.

“You will know when you find the coffin,” Enki replied. He raised his eyebrows. “Are you sure you still want to go?”

Inana felt a brief flash of nervousness and looked back into the pit. She had never flinched in her duty and had fought many foes. True, they had been mortal foes, but still…

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She nodded, and Enki turned away. “So be it,” he told her, leaving the door. “You go alone, though. I have better things to do.”

He hurried away, and Inana realized what he just did. If she hesitated, or demanded an escort, he would see her as a coward. As a matter of pride, she now had to go on, and Enki knew it.

She frowned. Was Enki trying to trick her? Or get rid of her? That didn’t make any sense, however; why not simply send her away?

She gritted her teeth and began walking down the stairs. For now, she would have to trust the old man.

Utu, Ereshkigal, and Atrahasis all inspected a suit of armor in the temple’s meeting room. Their men had arrived with the supplies from Enki’s this morning and had sent the suppliers back. Utu was donning it now, and admiring the mingled strength and lightness of it.

“Our officers will do well with this,” Utu said. “They will need it, given the challenge we face.

“Assuming the brigands are as many as they say,” Ereshkigal said. “What bothers me is why Inana didn’t return with them.” She turned to Atrahasis. “What is she doing?”

“I wish I knew,” he replied. “Enki is a wasted and untrustworthy man. How could any predict the actions of such a one?”

“Surely our sister could handle anything

there," Utu said. Ereshkigal sighed. "She can.

But for now, we are alone."

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For a day now, Inana had been walking through the catacombs. After reaching the bottom of the stairs, she had discovered halls and halls of empty rooms. So, one by one, she began to explore them, hoping to learn the secrets of the mountain.

So far, however, they had either been empty or had contained a few broken tablets with a style of cuneiform she couldn't read. Furthermore, when she tried to pick up one of them, it had crumbled away.

She continued her journey for many hours, until she was exhausted from hunger and the heavy stale air. When she found a room with a small fountain fed by an underground spring, she took a drink. The water was as stale as the air, but wasn't stagnant, given the fact that no life was down here. Then, she lay down to get a few hours of fitful, dreamless sleep.

When she awakened, she resumed her search. If she found nothing more by the end of the day, she would return home. Perhaps Enki would laugh at her folly, but none could say she was afraid of the shadows.

She found a room with a chair made of stone. Relieved, she went over and sat for a few minutes, grateful for the rest. In front of her was something resembling a fireplace, despite the fact that it wasn't cold. She put her head in her hands, tired and hungry. Yes, soon she would return home.

Then, something strange happened. She heard a tapping sound in the next room over. At first, she thought it was just a falling rock. But then, it repeated itself. Inana listened, and every few seconds, heard the tap repeated three times.

She slowly stood and walked back into the hall. The sound grew louder and

she discovered that it was coming from a room several feet down on the left. She walked to the doorway there, and peered in.

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Propped against the far wall was a large, stone coffin like box. It had a lid, and the lid had several symbols carved into it. The banging was coming from the inside. Inana gasped, and drew her sword. The curiosity she felt gave way to anxiety in the face of the supernatural. She wanted to know what was in the box and at the same time was praying that its lid couldn't be opened.

Then, the dust around the box's base stirred. The coffin levitated a few inched off the ground. Mesmerized at first, Inana perceived that it began to drift in her direction. She cried out and brandished her sword, but the box made no sign that the forces behind it noticed or cared.

She turned around and ran back the hall. Let Enki think her cowardly now, if she bothered to tell hm. She looked over her shoulder and saw that the coffin had drifted out of the room, and continued to float towards her. She kept running, first down one hall and then another, trying to make it back to the mines and the rooms where the living were.

The box kept up its pursuit, neither gaining on her nor slowing down. When she rounded another corner, Inana got an idea. She looked over her shoulder to make sure that the box hadn't het turned the corner itself. Then she ducked into a side room. It was darker, so she could crouch in the shadows.

In a few minutes, she saw the box drifting past the doorway. Inana mentally cursed herself for the act of hiding. It filled her with shame, but the box contained something that frightened her, something or someone that she didn't want to meet. Someone?

The box continued to drift, apparently not 'seeing' her. She gave a silent sigh of relief, wiping sweat from her brow. She would remain here for a few minutes and

then sneak back up the steps. Surely, she thought, the box wouldn’t follow her back.

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She looked up again, and gasped. The box was in the doorway, blocking any chance of escape.

It began to move in closer.

Inana stood, and desperately began swinging her sword back and forth. The box continued to close in. Then an invisible force yanked the sword out of her hand. It fell aside with a loud clatter.

To her increasing fright, the box's lid swung open. However, inside was only empty space.

Suddenly, the same force began pulling her, dragging her closer to the box.

Inana screamed and cursed, and struggled against the pull, but was spun around, slammed into the box's interior, and sealed in when the lid closed back over her.

She continued to shout in the cramped darkness. The force relented enough for her to bang her hands against the inside of the lid, but she was still trapped. She called out in vain for help, although she knew that, even if she could be heard though the lid, no other person had been down here in years.

Then, something different happened. While she heard no voice, a thought, not her own, entered her mind. It said to be calm; that she was in no danger.

What was going on? She thought. Did Enki know about this? Had he wanted to kill her after all, perhaps to get Ninshabar?

More thoughts entered her mind. No, it had nothing to do with Enki. This box, this thing, was a way to see things, all things, more clearly.

In her mind's eye, Inana seemed to forget all about the darkness. She could see her home city. Nor was she merely imagining it; she could see her siblings and

subjects preparing for war, although it was like recalling a memory.

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That was confusing to her. Was she seeing time in her head as a recollection, the present as if it were the past? She tried to think, tried to concentrate.

Her inner perception broadened. She could see an army murdering other farmers in the

neighboring lands. Her peoples' time of testing came very soon, although it wasn't quite time yet. What of the future? Could she see that as well as the present? If so, what a power to have. Why would Enki not be using this himself?

What will happen? She tried to see, to look as though looking down a long road. But that direction was clouded over, and only ended in death. She tried to see in other directions to the left and to the right.

She saw other places, other times that were neither her worlds present nor future. In another world, she saw silver and bronze skinned people engaged in an endless war. In yet another place, she saw a man like beast with stone skin and a single eye ruling over a frozen and barren land.

Yet here were none of the answers she sought. So finally, she turned her attention backward.

Concentrating hard, she tried to see the past, the time before her own, perhaps back to the very beginning of the world. It was at this moment when all her certainty was shattered.

She saw it all. She saw that everything she though she knew about her world and the gods over it was wrong. For before and beyond the world, she saw someone else. Or was it three some ones? She wasn't sure, only that the someone was as beyond her as a cube was more than a square. A person, persons, and something more all in one.

It was he who made the world, and not the gods who were made by it. They too were his creations, some with him, some against. The race of men were his too. But they had turned on him, and proceeded down a path of evil.

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Inana saw their world. Magnificent but terrifying. Possessing the powers of life and death. With their magic, they would lay waste to all the ageless god had wrought. There was war, too, devastating fires and floods as the oldest men sought to usurp the ageless god.

In the end, their world sank beneath the waves. All traces of it gone, except for this small retreat of theirs. The ageless god, not wanting to see all lost, rescued one family and the beasts of the earth out of the floods. She and all of the race of men were their descendants.

The ageless one wasn't finished, though. He would one day reveal himself to all, so all would know him. He offered Inana the knowledge now.

Inana hesitated, and drew back. For the ageless god asked not for the occasional tribute. He asked for all of her.

But he would give her rest, a rest and peace she had never known.

But what would happen to me? She thought. My duty? The power I already have? Trust.

That word entered her mind, and she felt the god's presence approaching. Then she began to panic.

"No. No!" she shouted audibly. They began pounding on the lid, desperate to escape.

The lid opened, and she fell out. Standing up quickly, she ran to where her sword had fallen. She turned back around, and faced the box.

The lid closed, and it hovered a few inches above the ground. It didn’t approach her, but neither did it back away.

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Inana snarled, although more frightened than angry, and brought her sword down on the box's side. A bright flash blinded her for a moment, and the box fell backwards, shattering into pieces. She felt the presence of the ageless god withdraw, although she didn't feel as though she had beaten him. Rather, he seemed to voluntarily leave her alone.

She breathed a sigh of relief. As the fear and confusion wore away, however, a sense of disappointment overtook her. She had sought a weapon or information that could help her become a more triumphant queen. Instead, all she had found was that her gods were no gods at all, and the only true one, it seemed, would have her turn control of her life and her city to him. But her position had been all she had ever known. How could she just abandon all she was and all she had fought for? Even if there was really something better, was it worth losing all else?

"No," she repeated to herself. So, that was it. This place truly had nothing for her.

Or did it? She slowly stood over the shattered box, and beheld the pieces. The box itself had taken the brunt of the fall. However, the lid still had about seven pieces that were more than broken shards. A lot of the cuneiform writing remained intact. Was any of that useful? Would Enki know anything?

She gathered up the intact pieces. Then, she hurried out of the room.

VI

Enki sat on his cushions, caressing a sleeping young woman in his arms. He had enjoyed her company last night, and had awakened in reasonably good spirits. Although he had tried to approach his guest's pretty handmaiden again, that spoiler Tammuz had firmly shooed him away. Luckily, he had resources of his own

to keep him amused.

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Just as his thought turned to Inana, the warrior queen entered his room unannounced.

Exhausted, and glassy eyed, she dropped seven stone slabs in the

cushion at his side. “What is it?” he asked, startled at her

behavior.

“Have you seen this?” Inana demanded, although her voice was tired. She had hurried out of the catacombs as quickly as possible. But the long way and added weight of the tablets had taken their toll.

“What did you find?” Enki asked. He looked more closely at the heap of stones next to him, and his eyes widened.

“Did you find the Me’?” he

asked. “The what?” she

asked.

Enki raised his hand. Another woman came in with a pitcher of water. While his guest drank deeply, Enki gently set his still sleeping evening companion down so he could pick up one of the pieces.

“It is,” he breathed. He looked at Inana. “The Me’ was the ‘coffin’ I mentioned earlier. Where it came from, I don’t know. The old ones who built this place would. I found it once myself, and learned some of its secrets.”

“I saw…” Inana coughed since she drank too quickly. “I saw an ageless god. He’s greater than all our gods.”

“Yes.” Enki frowned. “Frightening, wasn’t he? Yet the gods are merely

demons compared to him. Before him, who can stand?”

“You believe him then?” she asked.

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“I believe he exists,” he shrugged. “I don’t believe his words. See the difference? I too saw him in the Me’. I too ran away, only I never saw it again after that. Not that I made many attempts, mind you.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Tell me, how did you get

these pieces?” “I struck it down,” Inana replied. “This

was all that was left.”

“Amazing,” he said.

“Can you…can you read…” Inana trailed off as her head swam.

Enki looked up at her. “You are exhausted. My steward will show you back to your room,” he said. “Rest and then we will discuss these tablets further.”

From her private chambers near the top of the ziggurat, Ereshkigal looked down her window. She was so high up that she could see over the city wall to the deserts beyond. She wrung her hands nervously at what she saw.

The brigand army was approaching. Several hundred camped on the planes now. She could see the lights of several fires in the night. They had come, as they promised, ready to make war.

Her own forces were smaller, not so small that they were severely outnumbered, but the ensuing battle tomorrow would be costly at best. If they outlasted their opponents.

Utu and the soldiers were stationed on the wall. They would keep watch to guard against any sneak attack until morning. Then, it would begin.

She had wondered what she would do, but had hoped Inana would've returned by now with some great secret, something, anything to give them an advantage. But the only thing that had come from Enki's were a few suits of armor, and her sister was nowhere to be found.

She sighed heavily, knowing what she had to do. Atrahasis and the others had warned her, but what was she to do? If she didn't call upon a demon, the demons outside would attack anyway. While they admittedly didn't serve Nergal, surely the king of the underworld and disease would remember the servants of his brother. After all, no legend told to the two ever fighting.

Slowly, she walked to her door, and opened it. Looking out, she saw only the guard on duty.

That was good; she didn't want to argue with Atrahasis again, or anyone else.

With a gesture for her guard to follow her, she descended the staircase to the sanctuary area.

Now, it was empty. Her people would be in their homes now, beseeching the gods in private.

She walked to the altar to Sin as her sentry guarded the main door. Kneeling down, she donned one of the Eyes of Sin, and began to pray aloud. "Nergal, great god. Nergal hear me," she chanted. "I need you. My people need you."

She chanted an ancient prayer that she had read once in a hidden tablet buried as far away from casual viewers as possible. She felt a slow feeling of cold dampness overtake her. Her heart beat quickly with anticipation, but she had succeeded.

Nergal's attention had been caught. Although she could see nothing in the room, there was a definite presence just outside of her perception. Mingled

thoughts of fear and worship flew into her mind. Not even Sin had ever felt this close to her.

> “I offer myself to you freely,” Ereshkigal whispered. “Come Nergal. Come to me.”

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The presence faded from her senses, and she blinked. Had that displeased him? Had she been too presumptuous?

Suddenly, a cold dead hand clasped itself over her mouth from behind. She screamed through it, but to no avail.

Inana groaned, and slowly opened her eyes. She felt herself on a soft bed, and looked around.

As her vision cleared, she saw Tammuz and Ninshabar nearby. Her handmaiden smiled, and walked over to help her sit up.

"You are better, my queen?" she asked. "You have been asleep for nearly twelve hours."

Inana stretched her arms over her head. While still sore, she felt very rested, and ready again to study the tablets. Even the ageless god seemed far away now.

She stood, and looked around. "Are you well? It has been some time since I've seen you. Have you been left alone?"

"Mostly yes. Enki still came to stare at me occasionally." She hugged herself and looked down. "My queen, if you please, might we leave this place? Enki has such terrible eyes."

"I'm sorry, Ninshabar," she said. "But we must stay a little longer. I'm not

finished yet." Ninshabar nodded reluctantly. "As you wish, my queen."

Inana looked up. "Tammuz, what is your opinion of Enki and his house?"

"He is a filthy old man, nothing more, my queen," the guard said. "His warriors are unable to stop us if it came to that."

“Do you think he can teach you more of the tablets, my queen?”

Ninshabar asked. Inana walked out of the guest room. “I will see.”

Enki had gathered a feast for her in the main reception room. Inana ate gratefully, while Enki continued to look over the tablets. While initially surprised that he displayed them openly, there were no others in the house at that time besides his own people and her two servants.

When she finished, Enki pulled two chisels and hammers from a bundle at his feet. “The words on these tablets are written in an older language than our own, of course,” he told her. “However, I’ve managed to pick up a few pieces of doctrine. The ancients seemed to understand the inner workings of the flesh. It is possible that they could even restart it once the natural life ended.”

“Resurrection?” Inana breathed. Incredible. No wonder the ageless god had intervened. To have such a power would mean becoming a god oneself.

Inana felt a longing welling up in her. For while she defined herself by duty to her people, deep down she knew that her duty would only last as long as her life. Then what? Time spent with the gods in the underworld, she supposed, but there her duty would be at an end. Her people would still remain in the living world and the gods had little need of her. She could just be an aimless shadow. While she

couldn’t say she feared that, she didn’t want that to be her only fate either. She didn’t want that kind of anticlimax to be the final result of all her battles and all her struggles.

Of course, there was the ageless god, who offered something more. But she didn’t want to think of his power or his insistence on submission.

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Enki handed her a set of tools. “Help me shape these into proper tablets,” he said. “Then you and I will read them together.”

She nodded, and began to slowly chisel and whittle the blocks into a cleaner, more defined shape. She was careful not to damage any more of the wedge shaped cuneiform characters than she had to. As the two worked, Inana tried to read some of the words, only to find that she couldn’t read any of it clearly. Like an older version of spoken language, it had a familiar feel and rhythm. It came across as a conversation she was too far away from to completely hear.

“The writings of our ancestors were so much more than mere symbols and sounds,” Enki offered. “When you read it, you feel it, hear it in your head, and see it clearly before you. They can hold so much more than our poor language. We will never know all they knew, but perhaps we can get one thought.”

“What of the ageless god?” Inana asked. “Could he still see us?”

“I learned something interesting about him when I first encountered the Me’,” Enki replied. “If you turn from him, he will leave you be.”

“But he intervened when the secret of life was found,” she said.

“IF we are discreet and don’t overstep our bounds, he will do nothing,” Enki said. “We are not creating our own world, as the ancients did. We merely want a little something for ourselves.”

They finished carving the tablets, and looked down at them.

Enki looked them over, and his brow furrowed. “Do you remember how they

were arranged on the lid?”

“Not fully,” Inana said. “The biggest piece was in the middle...”

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She rearranged the pieces to make the central one in the middle of the table. “Then…yes, these next pieces were on top. Then the smaller one on the left…”

She and Enki moved the pieces around until they looked right. Enki skimmed over a few lines and read a few words. He pointed out what he could read and explained to Inana the differences between the older language and the one they used.

He placed his hands on the tablet closes to him and looked at Inana. “Let us try to read them together,” he said. “Concentrate hard, and follow my lead. Remember, the tablets must be experienced, not just read.”

She put her hand on the tablet nearest her, and the two began reading in lowered voices. Slowly at first, since she was new to the old language. She learned quickly, however, and as they read, she felt herself detaching from the present time and place. Like lying awake and relieving a vivid memory, she could see herself going backwards to that faraway time when the world was ruled by the magnificent but evil ancient ones, whose lives extended for centuries. Centuries in which to gather forbidden knowledge.

Then, they saw it. The secret of life. The ability to raise the dead. It was right before them.

“Are you ready?” Enki asked a few hours later.

They stood over a pit that had once served as either an arena or prison. Tammuz was with them, and dropped the carcass of a recently slain dog into the pit. This was to be the first attempt to apply what they had learned to an actual body. They had chosen an animal rather than a human due to the fact that they saw no point in murdering anyone before they were sure the spell worked.

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“I am ready,” Inana replied, gazing upon the fresh corpse. “This will take a lot of power.”

“Yes,” Enki agreed. “Hopefully, not so much that we lose control. Now, let us concentrate.”

Inana did, imagining the inside of the dog’s flesh. She felt the blood within the veins slowing and hardening up. She moved it to get it started again. Enki, meanwhile, worked on the heart and lungs, trying to get them to move again.

Tammuz gasped and Inana briefly turned her attention on the carcass. Not much made the

taciturn bodyguard startle, so she had to see what was happening. Sure enough, the dog’s legs were twitching. It was working! Inana fought the urge to cry out with glee, and focused her attention back on it. It would take more of her energy and will to make the dog live and breathe again on its own.

Then, the ageless god touched her mind again.

Out of nowhere, she felt his strong protests. He wasn’t alarmed; nothing could really surprise him. But he had become angry, and was pushing her mind away from the dog’s corpse.

“No!” Inana cried, angry and frightened at once. She needed this. This gift could make her people invincible. They need never fear injury and death again. Why would he let her have it?

“Push back,” Enki ordered, also feeling the ageless god’s presence.

“How?” Inana protested. “He’s too strong for us! He can stop us and break our minds!”

In the pit, the dog began thrashing with being pulled by multiple minds.

Indeed, it seemed to be pulling apart. Tammuz just looked from his mistress to Enki to the dog and back, dumbfounded.

“He won’t, though,” Enki said, mentally pushing his will on the dog. “Preserving human’s free will is of the utmost importance to him. That is his folly!”

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Inana pushed her will on the dog's flesh until her eyes blurred. The ageless god's anger mixed with sorrow, sorrow greater than any she had ever known. Then, he departed from her. Never again did she feel him close.

She collapsed, and Tammuz helped her to her feet. "Are you all right, my queen?"

"Yes," she said, breathing heavily. She brushed away a few tears that had crept in when she felt the ageless god's sadness. "This takes a lot out of you."

"It was mostly you at the end," Enki said. "I felt myself getting tired,

and deferred to you." "What about the ageless god?" Inana demanded,

irritated that she had to face him alone. Enki shrugged. "What about

him? Never mind. Look, we've succeeded."

He pointed down and they looked at the dog in the pit. It was still twitching on its own. Then it staggered to its feet and took a few unsteady steps.

Inana forgot her anger and fear, and looked in wonder. They had raised the dead. The dog moved and breathed as it did in life. Wait, no, not exactly. The dog's eyes were glazed over, and its neck was bleeding.

Then the dog began shaking, and swinging its head back and forth. After a few seconds, all three of them shouted and looked at each other in alarm.

The dog's head flew off, but that wasn't the worst of it. Where the neck had been there was a second mouth, filled with sharp teeth. The creature, no longer a dog, roared and ambled aimlessly through the cage. Then it turned its mouth in the direction of the horrified people.

Although it no longer had eyes, the beast snarled and tried to jump at them. The pit was too high for it however, so it shuffled to the wall below them. Continuing to snarl, it vigorously pawed and lunged upward, trying to climb walls that were too smooth.

Inana's face fell as she looked at the abomination. If this was all they could do then the knowledge gleaned from the Me' tablets was for nothing. At the very least, they would need to try with another subject.

"Tammuz," Inana said in disgust. "Kill it."

Tammuz drew his sword and brandished it over the creature below. When it made no sign of flinching, he skillfully threw it. The blade hit the beast between its shoulder blades, and it howled in rage and pain.

Then, it crumpled, twitched a few more times, and lay still. Moments later, a foul smell wafted up to them, and a steam rose from the dead body. Finally, it began to dissolve, collapsing from within until all that remained was Tammuz's sword in a puddle of mire.

"Why?" Inana asked Enki.

"I'm not sure," he said. "The spell uses a lot of energy, however, and must be too hot for the body to withstand when released. It would seem that we have more to learn, but don't worry. Soon, we should be able to create the beasts at will."

"Only if we can bend them to our will," Inana muttered.

They tried again the next day. Thankfully, they didn't feel the ageless god's protests, and the session went far more smoothly. The second animal's head still came off and the body underwent the

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same bizarre transformation as before. But this time, they kept if from going as wild and with concentration, found that they could even have it walk on its hind legs. Further concentration altered the bones and muscle structure, giving it a slightly more manlike gait.

As they worked together, Inana gained further and further appreciation for the paradox of Enki's character. On the one hand, he had such knowledge and skill that he could guide her through the rituals. On the other hand, he also had such vices that he would take hours away from their work to get drunk or sleep with one of his women.

She asked him at one point how such things could coexist within him. He only shrugged, and replied that he exercised all his impulses, both intellectual and otherwise.

"Only the ageless god would have you 'control' your feelings and behavior," he said. "Of course, you don't want to go to him, now do you?"

Because the spell took a lot of energy, Enki and Inana always felt tired at the end of their ritual. They had to have food and drink brought and then take an afternoon nap. In this manner, they created half a dozen of the creatures, or prowlers as they dubbed them.

Inana had hoped that she could try the task on a human body. If she could figure out how to cast the same spell without causing the altered form, then she would possess the means to keep both herself and her soldiers alive. An army of deathless soldiers could easily dispense with any outside threat. Her city and her people need fear nothing after that.

Still, the prowlers were a weapon in and of themselves. Just the fear they could induce made them an asset. Even Tammuz became noticeably uncomfortable around them. So she took her two servants and decided to take her leave of Enki.

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“We thank you for your hospitality, lord,” she told him. The four of them stood in the main

reception hall. Off to one side, the prowlers lurked. “I must return to the city. There is no way to tell when the brigands will strike again.”

“Of course, your majesty,” Enki replied. “It has been an honor having you as my guest.”

He looked at Ninshabar longingly one last time. The handmaiden frowned, tired of his stares but relieved that they were at last leaving.

“There remains one thing,” Inana said. “We need to divide up the prowlers and

the Me’ tablets.” “I’m sorry?” Enki asked.

Inana blinked. “Why yes. While they’re not what I expected, even a few will serve me well.

Besides, I can always make more with half of the tablets.”

Enki stepped back, and three of the prowlers came forward. Tammuz and Ninshabar stiffened, but Inana held firm. So the old man was going to haggle with them. No matter.

“You may have three prowlers, and no tablets,” Enki said. “In the future, if you or anyone else wants them, you will come to me with payment like any other weapon.”

Inana reached out with her mind, and felt the prowlers bind to her. However, she could only control so many so far without the tablets. Furthermore, the tablets were essential for channeling the will into making prowlers. If Enki was going to offer them to others, he would have the only means to. Worse, simply having multiple kings using them would take away any advantage as rival beasts could

simply kill one another.

She faced Enki. “Forgive me lord, but that won’t do. As the co creator of these, I wish…”

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“What?” Enki interrupted. He frowned, angry now as the other prowlers growled behind them.

“You think I’m being unfair?” he demanded. “All you paid me for was advice, which I gave. True, you helped create the Me’ tablets, but we used materials from my house. Meaning I own them. To say nothing of the food and drink I gave you.”

His eyes narrowed, and his voice lowered. “I told you, I’m part of no kingdom. Nor have I ever taken orders from anyone younger than I, let alone a woman. Leave my house, Inana. I’m not your servant.”

“Dog! You dare be insolent?” Tammuz shouted before Inana could voice her own rage. He drew his sword, ready to hold it at the old craftsman’s throat. Enki cried out, but before Inana knew what was happening, one of her prowlers leaped forward, and jumped on Tammuz’s back.

The warrior cried out as the beast bit into the back of his neck. Ninshabar screamed and Inana drew her sword, cursing herself. She had expected one of the prowlers in front to attack, not expecting Enki to mentally snatch one of hers back.

As Tammuz died, she sent her two remaining prowlers to the rogue one. The beasts fought, but her two pulled the rogue apart in front of them. Enki growled, and raised a tablet from where he had been concealing it.

One of Inana’s prowlers dissolved, and the other began thrashing, caught between the wills of Enki and Inana. Inana tried to advance on the old man, but his mind was stronger with the help of the tablet, and the remaining prowlers advanced.

She turned to her servant. “Ninshabar! Run!”

They tried to back away and run out the front door, but Enki finally captured all the prowlers in the room. They blocked the doorway, as Enki laughed. Panicked, they ran down the hallway in the direction of the forges.

Behind them, all the prowlers regrouped and began chasing them. Fortunately, due to the awkwardness of their strides, the two women were able to outrun them by pushing forward.

They entered the forges, and the blacksmiths cried out in alarm. One of them stepped forward, brandishing his hammer, but Inana cut him down before he could strike. They leaped over his corpse as the other men stood back to let the prowlers by. Behind them, their master followed, cackling with glee.

They ducked down another corridor, determined not to be driven into the catacombs where they would be lost forever. Then they had to stop. They had reached the arena. In front of them was the pit, and it had no way in or out unless someone threw them a rope.

> They turned, but it was too late. The prowlers appeared in the doorway, growling and grasping.

Ninshabar screamed again, and Inana swore. Enki had won. It was over.

But she wouldn't go down without a fight. She grabbed her handmaiden, and jumped down into the pit. They landed hard, but on their feet. Inana pushed her confused servant aside, and held her sword up. She figured that the prowlers would start jumping at them, but she hoped to slash at them as they fell. Maybe, just maybe, they would kill at least a few of them before they joined Tammuz.

The prowlers, however, didn't follow. They simply flanked the upper lip of the pit, and drooled from their unnatural mouths. Then they parted to allow Enki to

stand in the midst of them.

He smiled smugly at the two trapped women. “Well,” he said. “It would seem you ran the wrong way, Inana.”

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“Bring them on,” Inana shouted back, swinging her sword. “Apsu don’t die easily.”

“No, I’m sure,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “But come, come, there’s no hurry. Take your time to calm down and reconsider. You are the one in the wrong here.”

“My people will come for you,” Inana warned. “Even if you kill us, we will not go…”

“Yes, yes,” Enki interrupted, waving his hand. “Assuming that they aren’t too busy with the war you feared. Besides, I have the new prowlers and the remote mountains on my side. If your Tammuz
was one of your best, then…”

He shrugged, and Inana glowered at him in silence. If the pit hadn’t been so steep, she would have leapt up and ran the sword through that repulsive mound of flesh before the prowlers could retaliate. Never, in all her years of fighting, had she imagined that it would end this way.

“Let me make a bargain with you, Inana,” Enki said. A slow smile crept onto his face as he got an idea. “I am forgiving. Throw down your sword, surrender, and I will allow you to leave with your life. I’ll even ignore the fact that you killed one of my best workers.”

“In return for what?” she asked through gritted teeth. She didn’t put

down her sword. Enki pointed at Ninshabar. “You will give me that

lovely girl. Permanently.”

“No,” Ninshabar whispered. Inana didn’t look at her, but kept facing Enki.

Ninshabar mistook this for consideration, and raised her voice to a scream.

“No! You hideous old pig! That will never happen!”

She looked on the ground for a rock, or anything to throw at him. She only saw a clod of dried mud, which she quickly grabbed and threw at him. Enki only laughed again.

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Inana had had enough. She quickly threw her sword at Enki, knowing she would lose it, but hoping to injure him in the process.

Unfortunately, his mind was faster than his body ever could be and he willed a prowler to jump in the way. It caught the blade in its gut, died, and began to dissolve.

Enki picked up the sword. “Think about it,” he told them. Then he departed without another

word.

VIII

They spent an uncertain number of days in the pit. It was hard to tell how long given the fact

that they couldn’t tell if it was day or night. Furthermore, Enki didn’t have any food sent to them, only a bucket of water delivered by Ninurta here and there.

From that, Inana guessed that they had been there at least five days. Every time he came, the steward repeated Enki’s offer but Inana refused. At first, she was inclined to wait for her men to come. She had been gone long enough now that they should be missing her and sending out search parties.

None came, however, and Inana didn’t know what to think. She hadn’t been neglected; she was sure of her men’s loyalty to her. So where were they? Had the brigands attacked by now? Worse, was her city under siege, perhaps even falling while they waited here?

The thought drove her mad, as she paced the floor, agitated and wanting to do something. Ninshabar saw her restlessness, and asked if her queen was considering giving her to Enki after all. Inana assured her handmaiden that she

would protect her honor, for which she received a hearty thanks.

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Overhead, two of the prowlers stood guard. Inana resisted the urge to try and take control of them. It wouldn't do any good down here; without the tablets, she wouldn't be able to send them very far before the stronger Enki would take them back.

She stopped pacing, and thought about her captor. Was there any way to outwit him? What if she could break his concentration, distracting him by using his own vices against him?

That was it. She smiled slowly to herself as she realized what to do.

She heard footsteps, and looked up. Ninurta returned with another bucket of water. He looked at the two women as Inana stood up and held her hands out in a placating gesture.

"Well, queen?" he asked. "Have you reconsidered my lord's offer?"

"I have," she replied and Ninshabar gasped, looking at her mistress with horror, disbelief, and hurt. But she bowed her head, and fought back tears, loyal to the end. Inana felt an unfamiliar pang of remorse for not telling her handmaiden her plan. Only rarely did she regret any of actions, but Ninshabar had to act genuinely.

Inana looked at Ninurta as he lowered the bucket. "I offer not my handmaiden, but myself."

She took a drink and gave the rest to the stunned Ninshabar. Inana clasped her shoulders briefly, but said no more.

The steward himself was shocked. "How can this be? Surely your spirit has not broken so

soon?"

“No, but hunger can cause the fiercest to submit. I’m no good to my people dead.” He considered. “How can I trust you?”

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“Come; you have my sword and two prowlers to guard you,” Inana insisted. “If I tried anything, my life is forfeit.”

After a few minutes, Ninurta nodded, and threw down another rope. “Very well. You will come at once.”

He held the other end of the rope and helped pull Inana out. Then he escorted her back to Enki’s main room. Behind them, the prowlers followed, obviously not considering Ninshabar alone to be any threat.

She entered Enki’s room to find him alone, and already holding a glass of wine. Inana smiled inwardly. Perfect.

Before the steward could speak, Inana bowed low. “My lord, you fought well. I acknowledge my defeat. Please let me return to my people.”

Enki sneered. “Fine words, but I see no handmaiden.”

Inana did something then that she had never done before, and hoped that she would never do again. She got on her knees and bowed before someone else. Even before the alter of Sin, she had only inclined her head, never kneeled.

But she had seen no sign of Sin in the Me’. He was an idol, and the other gods were either idols too or demons. There was only the frightening ageless god. And herself.

“You?” Enki asked in disbelief. He slowly stood and addressed his son. “Leave us. But have a prowler outside the doorway.”

Ninurta bowed and left. Enki then stood in front of Inana. “Why should I believe this? What guarantee do I have?”

She didn't answer, but bowed lower, unaccustomed to obeisance. He hesitantly reached out and ran a grimy hand through her hair. She fought the urge to grab his arm and twist it off. Enki took another drink of wine, emptying the glass, and walked over to the cushion. "Come here," he decided.

"Please, my lord?" she asked. "Might I have some of your wine first?"

He snorted. "Will that make things easier for you?" he asked. Then he shrugged. "Very well.

The end result is the same."

He sat at his table, and beckoned. Inana sat down across from him, and he poured each of them a glass of wine. She sipped slowly, with her eyes downcast, while he drank his and gazed at her, doing both more greedily.

"My lord, tell me. What has become of Tammuz's body? He was a good man. Might he have a decent burial?"

"I'm afraid not," Enki replied. "You see, while you were in the pit, I tried to use the Me' tablets on him. I didn't know if I could call his soul back or if I'd merely have a man like prowler at my disposal."

"And?" she prompted, drinking more of her wine.

Enki grimaced and drained his glass. "The body dissolved instantly. Horrible sight, even for an enemy. It would seem that human flesh resists the magic."

Inana felt both angry and disappointed at the desecration of her warrior's body. She finished her own wine, and pushed her glass back over to Enki. "May we have a toast to him?"

He nodded, and poured them another glass, eager to get the gruesome

memories out of his mind. While he continued to drink heavily, Inana sipped slowly. Then, they heard the shuffling of a

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prowler outside their doorway. Enki looked up, and she poured the remainder of her drink into his glass. Luckily, he didn't notice, and picked it back up to finish it.

"If there is a secret to living forever, I don't know it," he confessed. "It's a pity; I'm even more interested in it than you, needless to say."

"Well, think of it as a challenge," Inana offered. "You have had too few of those for too long."

"Mmm. You know," he squinted, and she could see that his eyes were getting glassier. "I'm not sure which is better. Striving forever, or having nothing left to strive for." He laughed. "But you'll

forgive an old man for waxing philosophical."

"My lord, you are certain that the formula was done correctly?"

Inana asked. "Of course. I'm familiar with it," he answered.

"Perhaps there is something else in the tablets?" she asked

She casually walked over to the cushion. The seven tablets were stacked off to the side. Enki jerked up, and began to raise himself, but Inana got on her knee again. "I'm merely bringing them to you, my lord."

Enki's eyes narrowed. "No tricks," he warned.

She picked up the tablets and brought them over to him. Pulling out the top one, she placed it in his hand. Enki grunted and looked it over. Inana took this time to pour him yet another glass of wine.

"I can't see anything here that says it's any different under any circumstances."

She handed the glass to him, and he took a drink without paying a lot of

attention. Then she looked over his shoulder, pretending to read.

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“My lord.” She pointed to a word in the middle of the tablet. “Wasn’t this word different before?”

Enki peered closely. “No.”

“No, I’m sure it was different.” It was a lie, but she had his attention and had replaced his suspicion with confusion. “Did not my lord say that reading and using the tablets is an experience? Perhaps the experience changed it, made it something new.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said, taking a sip.

She picked up the second tablet and handed it to him. “Have a look and see, my lord. We must be sure.”

“You’re imagining things,” he grumbled, putting a hand to his temple, and massaging his forehead. He then took the second tablet, and handed the first one back to her. Inana put it down, on the other side of the table, outside his reach.

“It’s fine,” Enki said, after pouring over it. Inana looked over his

shoulder again. “No, my lord. See this line here? Some of the

words are reversed.”

He muttered something, and took another drink. Inana handed him the third, and placed the second next to the first.

“This one is the same, my lord,” Inana told him. After all, he would need some reassurance if she were to keep leading him.

They kept inspecting the tablets, one after another. Enki was so caught up in this that he didn’t notice her arranging them in a circle. Finally, he had the seventh

tablet in his hands.

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“Some are different and some are not?” Enki asked her. “Even if that’s so, how do we know

that…?”

He broke off when he looked over and saw the other tablets. His mouth

dropped open in shock. “What are you doing?”

With frightening speed, Inana reached out and grabbed his arm. She twisted it quickly, and the softened bones in it snapped. Enki screamed in rage and excruciating pain, dropping the last tablet.

Not giving him time to think, Inana leapt up, grabbed him by the color, and punched him in the nose. He fell backwards on the floor, missing his cushions.

Inana grabbed the seventh tablet, and put it in the middle of the circle. Concentrating her will on the prowler outside, she summoned it to come in the room. She directed it at Enki, who screamed again, and tried to get up. The prowler lumbered over to him and had its claws and teeth in the old man’s flesh before he could even think of escaping.

Inana didn’t look behind her, but touched the tablets and reached out to the other prowlers in the building. She summoned them to her as Ninurta ran down the hall with a guard.

She quickly turned the prowler that had killed Enki on the pair. The guard shouted, and swung his sword, killing the prowler. As it dissolved, however, several others appeared in the hall and sprang on the two men before they could reach Inana.

She gathered the seven tablets up and wrapped them in a piece of cloth.

Then she walked out of the room, with the beasts at her side. Walking back into the main anteroom, she sprang them upon the guards.

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The men drew their blades, and fought valiantly. But the prowlers attacked with an unlimited savagery that clawed, bit and tore even as they were being hacked into themselves. Inana watched from the side, wishing to join the fight and give the brave men a more honorable death. But she had no sword and needed to keep the tablets close.

She did find, however, that when the prowlers were in full attack mode she could relax her mental hold on them somewhat. Without another trained mind to turn them away, they would continue to attack the last foe they had been directed against. That was good; it meant that she could hide away the tablets but still use them without having to carry them everywhere.

In the end, three more of the prowlers were cut down, but all of the warriors perished. Inana turned to walk back to Ninshabar. All the remaining creatures followed.

In the forges, the workers stiffened. Most of them backed up, and some raised their hammers up in fear. Inana looked at them, wondering what to do. True, she could try to kill them and plunder this place later. But squeezing her army into the mountain pass and back would prove cumbersome. Furthermore, it would be a pity to see their craft knowledge lost.

Ninurta, amazingly having escaped the prowlers, ran in and spoke up. “Well?” he asked quietly. “Will you kill us as well?”

Inana looked around at the frightened men. Somewhere else in the compound, the women must be huddled away in fear, waiting for their own end. She decided that enough blood had been shed for now. Once she was away, they shouldn’t pose any more threat. Let them continue to sell their wares on their own,

if they could.

“I want my sword, my handmaiden, and my horses,” she told them. “Give me this and enough food and water for the return home, and I’ll let you live.”

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“Just like that, Apsu queen?” Ninurta asked. “No further vengeance?”

“You should be grateful not fearful that I delivered you from that dog. Be your own masters now. Or not. It doesn’t matter. You aren’t my enemies, but you aren’t my people.”

He hesitantly nodded, and went to fetch Ninshabar out of the pit. When she was delivered, she staggered to her mistress’ arms, shaking with hunger, fatigue, and relief.

IX

Moments later, the two women rode their horses away from the front of Enki’s compound. Ninshabar was still starved, but Inana wanted to get to the edge of the mountain pass before they rested. Outside the compound, the pass was narrow enough to prevent any sneak attacks. Not that she felt she was in any danger now, but it still paid to be careful.

They reached the foothills of the mountain, and none had made any attempts to follow. So they stopped, and Ninshabar ate ravenously the dried meat and bread they had been given. Inana sat beside her, and their horses stood off in the shade. The prowlers hunched down and stood guard a few yards down the pass. While they made both the horses and Ninshabar nervous, all served Inana. As it should be.

Looking out over the desert, the Apsu queen reflected on the events of the past few days. Was it to be counted a success or failure? True, she found the Me’ tablets and the powers they possessed.

But would they be enough against all enemies? What about the other things she had learned, the

knowledge that the gods weren't really gods at all? Was Enki wrong? She didn't think so. For she had gazed into the mysteries of the world. For a moment, the veil that shielded human understanding for what was beyond it all had been lifted, and Sin was nowhere to be found. She had seen only idols and demons. None of it mattered in the end.

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Unless…unless the ageless god was indeed the source of life. Unless they indeed lived for him.

No, she thought. Not that. She wouldn't believe that.

Was there any alternative? She thought as her handmaiden kept eating and the animals tried to keep out of the afternoon sun. What if…what if she herself could take the powers she had learned and create her own meaning? After all, she was a queen. Her people looked to her for leadership and protection. Could they not look to her for more? Could she one day be goddess as well as queen?

It seemed insane to think that. Indeed, to be goddess to even one other person would require great strength and skill, more than even she had now. It would take great effort and be an incredible burden. Yet…the possibility also filled her with a sense of interest and anticipation. How great that would feel, how fulfilled would her duty to her people be.

Yes, she thought. Enki did teach me much. He had been his own master, but had also been a sick and petty man, enslaved to his own lusts. She would not be slave to her desires. She would not be slave to any god. She would find true freedom and power, and be blessed.

That evening, they rode into a ruined camp in the middle of the desert. A caravan stood there, wrecked. Dead bodies littered the area around the makeshift fire pit. Tents were ripped, and the horses had either been slain or stolen.

She leaned over one of the bodies and saw that it was one of Enki's men. This was the same party that had delivered their purchased goods to Apsu. Inana remembered that they hadn't returned, and had wondered why. They had been too distracted with the prowlers to give it too much thought, but it now was clear that

they had been ambushed by the brigands.

“They are attacking,” Inana said. “We must get back to our city!”

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“My queen,” Ninshabar spoke up. “Forgive me, but the horses are exhausted. It took two days to get there before, and I don’t think I can make it in one either.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Do you not see what is happening? Our people need me.”

“Yes, my queen. But Utu and his men were all trained by you. They will hold the city if they haven’t driven the enemy back by now. These men have been dead for days.”

Inana cursed, and shook her fist at the situation. Her handmaiden was right. Even if they did reach the city, it would be dark, and they’d be so tired that an ambush could easily happen. Then the
brigands would get the Me’ tablets and use them against her once they learned their secrets. No, it was better to rest and come up slowly on the city in the morning.

“Very well. We’ll camp here and rise in the morning,” she decided. “The enemy, if they are there, will be tired and we can overtake them then. Mark my words, though, if they have spilled Apsu blood, then how much more will I respond in kind.”

The next morning greeted them with rising billows of smoke in the direction of Apsu. They quickened their pace, fearing the worst. Inana tried to control her growing fear the she had failed her people. She had been away too long; she should have tried to attack the brigands before she had gone to Enki’s. Now, it seemed that they had organized themselves into a force to challenge her.

They rode up a sand dune and looked upon Apsu. The walls stood, and

guardsmen could be seen patrolling on top of them. On the plains between them and the city walls were several tents and campfires. An enemy siege had indeed begun while they were away.

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However, that wasn't the most baffling part. To one side of the encampment, she saw a score of her own warriors armed with flaming arrows. They were shooting the enemy tents, setting them ablaze. No resistance came from the enemy camp, however, and as they slowly rode up, Inana noticed that the men who were visible within the camp were dead.

"My queen! My queen, you return!" a voice called out.

She looked back at her men, who had stopped shooting. They recognized her, and bowed, as one of their numbers ran forward. Inana saw that it was none other than Utu, dressed in one of Enki's armor suits. He stood before her and bowed low.

"My queen, victory is ours! The brigands have perished," he told her.

Inana breathed a sigh of relief. Despite their setbacks then, they were safe. Her delay hadn't cost her people. Soon, the other soldiers were coming up to her, and she removed her veil to smile at them.

"Well done," she told them. "You fought well. Tell me, what is happening?"

Utu rose. While he was clearly happy to see her, some of the gleam left

his eyes. "Sister…our victory is not without cost," he said. "Our enemies

were struck down, not by
natural means, but through plague."

Inana started, and looked at the enemy camp again. "What happened?" she repeated.

"The enemy was vast. So vast that…Ereshkigal sealed herself in the

sanctuary. Only one guard attended her, but he says she…”

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He looked down and shuddered. Inana tried to control her own uneasiness, for she knew what he would say before he said it.

“She summoned Nergal.”

“Go on,” she ordered through gritted teeth. How could Ereshkigal have been so foolish? How could she be so impatient? Now…

“The men had begun to advance on us,” Utu continued. “But then, they began to cough and choke. Some of them grew discolored, and others collapsed. Then they retreated to their camp.

“We held the wall, expecting them to regroup. But they only stayed where they were. After a few days, we began to notice them dying. We wondered that they didn’t simply leave, but we believe that they were too weak by then.”

He looked behind her and noticed the prowlers for the first time. His eyes widened. “What…”

“Your queen has not been idle in her absence,” Inana replied, perhaps more stiffly than necessary. However the bitter victory had put her on the defensive once more. Nergal. God of plague. She commended her men’s foresight in burning the enemy camp, but feared that it would still cross over into her city, no matter what. For the evil god never gave, only took. It would seem that, unlike Sin, he was no mere idol.

“These beasts serve me,” Inana said, as her men peered behind her to get a better look. “I have grown in power and strength. Let us hope that this will be the only time our paths cross Nergal’s. Tell me, where is Ereshkigal?”

“She

vanished.”

“What?”

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He bowed again. “Forgive me, sister, but after she had apparently cast the spell and summoned Nergal, she disappeared. When other guards came, the sentry on duty was mad. The Eyes of Sin were at the foot of the altar. No other sign of her was ever found.”

Inana and Ninshabar exchanged a look. “Escort me in,” she ordered.

The guards led the queen and her party up to the gates. They opened, and she finally reentered her city. As soon as she did, however, she instantly sensed something amiss.

The air was heavy and stale. Despite the brigands being all dead, only a minimum of pedestrians walked the streets. They bowed as she passed, then cowered in fear before the prowlers following in her wake. Behind closed doors, she heard coughing and wheezing. So, the plague had already made its way past the walls. If she still believed that Sin existed, she would’ve prayed to him.

They entered her palace court and dismounted. She signaled for Utu, Ninshabar, and the prowlers to follow. The other men saw to the tired horses before resuming their duties of burning the remnants of the brigand army. Even this far from it, Inana could still smell the burning flesh and canvas.

Fortunately, the smell hadn’t wafted inside yet, and she found Atrahasis in the meeting room.

“You’re back,” he said, rising and clasping her shoulder. “We feared that you had been killed.” Atrahasis looked at both her and the prowlers. He looked down, but nodded grimly to himself.

“So. You did make it to Enki.”

“Yes,” Inana confirmed. She pulled out the Me’ tablets, and laid them on a table.

“It is not good, my queen,” he continued. “Nothing good or pure has ever come from that house. Whatever price you paid for those…things…”

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“I lost Tammuz,” Inana said, cutting himself off. “It was a terrible loss, but I avenged him, and gained knowledge I never imagined.”

Atrahasis looked up. “Enki is dead?”

“By my hand,” Inana replied. “I spared his servants, though. I hope to continue trading with them.”

“Our war seems to be over,” Utu said. “But at a terrible price. Atrahasis has been giving me advice on how best to handle the spread of the plague.”

“Your majesty, I believe that we need to keep people in their own houses for several days,” Atrahasis said. “The plague seems to spread faster in crowds.”

“Let me speak to the people once first,” Inana said. “They need to see their queen. I give my people hope.”

She looked around. “Where is the guard who was with my sister?”

“I was hoping to spare you that for a moment, at least,” Utu said. “But you may as well see him.”

He led her to a room down the hall. As they walked to the door, they heard a piercing scream of fear and despair.

They ran to the door, and went in. On a makeshift bed, Inana saw one of her guards tied down and thrashing. His eyes were widened and his mouth opened and closed, as if he was trying to say something.

She leaned over him. “What happened?” she asked. “What did you see?”

“I…I…” He screamed again.

She grabbed his shoulder, and tried to keep him from thrashing. “Where is my sister?” she demanded.

“He took her! Nergal! I saw him! It was horrible!”

“He’s been like this since we found him,” Utu told her. He looked down, while Ninshabar and Atrahasis cringed. Even Inana bit her lip; she had seen death, had seen bodies broken, and lives ended.
But to see a broken mind, to have everything that made a man a man swept away…

“Please! Please, my queen,” he shouted. “If I’ve pleased you, kill me! Kill me now! I don’t want to remember!”

He thrashed again, and Inana slowly drew her sword. With mingled pity and disgust, she granted his wish.

Then she turned to the others. “Assemble the people,” she said. “I would speak with them.”

Later, the people who weren’t sick stood in the public temple space. Utu and Inana stood in front of the altar of Sin once more, and watched the people’s reactions. They were tired, exhausted from both the ordeal of the plague and the fear of the siege that preceded it.

They all looked to their queen, desperate for answers. She met their gaze and nodded reassurance, wondering how much to tell them and how fast.

She couldn't tell them the truth about Sin, at least not yet. They needed that to hold on to as well, until she could transition them over into seeing her as their goddess. Indeed, she herself would need to grow further before making such a claim.

She did know that several had already seen the prowlers. While she would parade them out and frighten the people unless she had to, she would allow word to spread of her new powers. That would confirm that she had grown in her absence.

She felt the weight of responsibility on her now. For while the brigands were gone, she would still have the challenge of the plague. To say nothing of the future.

She began to speak, squaring her shoulders and standing up straight. "My people, we have endured much, and have emerged victorious!"

Her guards cheered. A few of the commanders did as well, but most still looked disheartened.

"Not without a price to be sure" she continued. "You have heard of my leaving the city for a long time. That is true, but know, my people that I would never abandon you. My trip was to gather power, and rule you more strongly. Never again will there be foes from without. Never again need you fear, so long as you are with me."

Her gaze looked out over them all. "Together, we will triumph. The road ahead may prove difficult, but we will triumph. Let me hear you say it. Together, we

will triumph.”

“Together, we will triumph,” her men called out. A few of the others stood up straighter, regaining some confidence, but not enough for her. She had them repeat the chant for nearly half an hour before all were saying it.

“We will triumph!”

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“We will triumph!”

X

From the front steps of the palace, Inana watched a wooden cart carrying vegetables came through the city gate. It rode down the street towards the palace. It contained a pitifully small crop from the Apsu farms surrounding the main city. Although the plague had run its course, many of the fields had been blighted and a good portion of the livestock had died.

So over the past year, Inana had been forced to ration the food brought in to ensure that all her people got at least something to eat. Every week, she had been forced to cut their share further back, only leaving the provisions for her guards untouched. Not only were they responsible for protecting the city, but they would very likely revolt if they were underfed. At all costs, they must remain loyal to her, if she was to maintain order.

She had made almost no progress in her studies of forbidden knowledge. True, she had learned to create prowlers, and had made several more over the past few months. However, she had tried to repeat the process on human bodies multiple times, and had never succeeded. There must be something in the human form that resisted the power, and the subjects had melted away without ever transforming first.

Perhaps it was just as well. Since the prowlers were mindless, more than likely a human body reanimated would do the same. No, she needed something else, some way of extending life or cheating death if her people would ever recognize her as a goddess.

As the cart came down the street, a dark shape darted out of an alley and grabbed a vegetable. Inana snapped out of her musing, and shouted out. The guards drew their swords, but she waved them back. Concentrating her thoughts on the inside of the palace, she summoned prowlers to her aid.

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Three of the beasts ran out, and down the stairway, roaring furiously. In the street, the horses, pulling the cart, reared up, and their driver frantically tried to keep them under control.

She followed as the prowlers ran down the dark alley where she had seen the thief. They ducked into an open door, and she heard a woman scream.

Inana went inside to see a filthy woman crumpled on the floor. One of the prowlers had bitten her leg, and another grabbed her head with its paws, ready to bite her neck. Behind a closed door in the rooms far side, she heard the sounds of children screaming in fear.

She signaled before the prowlers could kill her, and they stood down. Reaching down, she pried the vegetable from the woman's hand. She cried out, and fought to keep it, even while bleeding from a wounded leg.

"No! My children," the woman protested.

"You would steal from your queen and your city?" Inana

challenged. "I have children! They need to eat," she

cried hysterically.

Inana slapped her to make her see reason. "There are thousands of children in this city," she said, lowering her voice. She grabbed the woman's hair, and made her look at her. The woman's eyes were bright with tears and her lip trembled.

Inana felt anger, not merely at the woman for stealing but her own failure to provide for the people. Inana found that she hated the day to day administration of Apsu. In the past, Ereshkigal had handled most of it. Utu had guarded the city, and

she had fought Apsu’s wars abroad. She was a warrior, not a bureaucrat, and wanted problems to be solved in the simple straightforward way of the warrior.

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Her anger then extended to Ereshkigal for her stupidity. Anger seemed to be all she really felt lately, and it was wearing on her.

“Do you think yours matter more than anyone else’s?” Inana

asked the mother. “Yes! They’re mine!”

Inana stood up, and waved the prowlers back. The woman’s face calmed for a moment as she seemed to think she’d be spared. She even had the audacity to hold out her hand, as if Inana would return the stolen vegetable.

Inana, however, quickly drew her sword, and beheaded the mother with one swift stroke. The corpse hit the ground, not even having time to scream once more.

“Now your children will have that much more to eat,” Inana told the corpse.

Beyond, the children could still be heard sobbing and whimpering. Inana left the vegetable and decided to leave them be. They would have enough trouble now, as it was.

She left the house, and returned to the cart, which was now flanked by guards and prowlers. “Nothing to see,” she told them. Continue to the palace.”

Later in the day, the people were assembled in the temple once more. Before the altar, food was piled up, and the guards stood by closely. Prowlers stood at the perimeter of the crowd, watching for any signs of rioting. They were all here to get their weekly ration of food and bow to their queen and their god for thankful submission.

Inana hadn't discouraged worship of the moon god in the last few months. But she also hadn't replaced Ereshkigal with a new priest or priestess. The people had wondered, and whispered, and Inana found herself with yet another worry. First things first, however; she must address the shortage of food.

She stood up and began speaking in a loud voice. "Before we begin, there is something I must tell you. It has come to my attention that some are unhappy with how the food is being shared. Some think that they and their families outrank others."

They watched her quietly. She scowled, pulled out her sword, and struck it on the ground. It made a loud enough sound to make several people jump and others flinch. That was good; Inana wanted them off balance for now.

"What would you have?" she demanded. "You know the famines. Did the Apsu bring them on themselves? No. This is but a poor season, but prosperity will come. All must weather this period and sacrifice comfort for the greater good of the city.

"Perhaps some of you resent the soldiers being given more. Well then, I ask you, what kind of men would you want fighting your battles and defending your houses? Weak or strong? Do not the stronger fight better? No, the soldiers have no special privileges. Only duties that spare you from having to fight.

"We must have order. Without that, we will be a den of jackals, not a city of men. Or perhaps you wish to leave? Anyone believe they can survive outside the city alone?"

She stopped speaking and looked at them. None dared answer.

“Very well. You have chosen wisely.” She looked to the first row of people. “You may come and get your food. Each one of you will kneel and give me your thinks and your promise of loyalty before I give it to you, however. Come one at a time. Remember, we will triumph.”

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XI

That evening, Inana heard a pounding on her door. She looked up from where she was seated. After today, she had wanted to eat her dinner in private, but clearly even that was asking too much. She threw down her napkin, put her head in her hands, and took a deep breath before straightening back up.

“Enter,” she said.

The door opened, and Atrahasis came in, followed by a sheepish Ninshabar. At her door, a soldier stood guard, and faint screams could be heard in the distance.

“My queen, forgive me, but…” Ninshabar began.

“We must talk,” Atrahasis interrupted. “Several floors down, the prowlers are killing every prisoner in the dungeons. Your guards, meanwhile, do nothing.”

“I ordered it to be so,” Inana said. Both her handmaiden and her advisor looked stunned as they stood opposite her. She rose to face them.

“Every day, rationing gets more resistance from the common people,” she said. “So I’ve decided that criminals will no longer be jailed. If they transgress, they forfeit both their share and their life.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “You disagree?”

“My queen, why prowlers?” he asked. “If we must be this harsh, why not simply kill them with the sword? Why such cruelty?”

“Because the prisoners are not so weak that they couldn’t fight back first,” Inana answered.

“When they see the prowlers, most will be so frozen with fear that they will be killed far more easily. So I think that I am showing mercy. Besides, the fear of the

beasts will deter other criminals.”

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“Like the one this morning?” Atrahasis demeaned. “I heard you killed a woman over one vegetable.”

“She was a thief.”

“She was a

mother!”

“What is that to you?” she snapped. “How many mothers am I responsible for? How many people must I save? I saved your life once, and instead of gratitude, all you’ve ever done is complain.”

She approached him, and stared him down. Atrahasis, however, didn’t flinch. Inana could never intimidate him; perhaps that was why she disliked him. “Perhaps you think you could do better,” she whispered dangerously.

He shook his head. “Where is the mercy, queen? You always say that you work to protect the people. But have you ever considered whether the world you’re making is even worth living in?”

She drew her breath, and tensed up. Ninshabar took a step back, fearing the queen’s simmering

anger.

“Very well then,” Inana said. “Since you seem to think Apsu isn’t fit to live in, you will be banned from ever seeing it again. Utu will escort you to the gates with a horse and your final rations. If you ever try to reenter, my guards will have orders to kill you on sight. Do you understand? Now

leave.”

The door sentry roughly grabbed Atrahasis’ arm, but he didn’t resist. Inana

exchanged a final hard stare with him before he left. Ninshabar looked back and forth between them. She stepped towards her mistress, but Inana shooed her away. She left, and the queen was alone to brood once more.

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While, on one level, she was happy to be rid of the malcontent, she also wondered how widespread his feelings were. Indeed, what did she have to offer her people besides concrete threats alternating with vague promises that things would grow better?

She needed something else, preferably some boon to grant those who were faithful. Once again, her thoughts drifted to immortality. For while she knew her old gods were false, while she didn't know where or how the world began, she did know that there was life beyond death. Could there be a way to postpone death? For her and for anyone else who was worthy?

She ate her food in silence, weighing her options. The Me' tablets themselves had yielded no further insight, but what if she were to reach beyond them? Could she call forth one who was already dead, one who had been in the afterlife? And if so, would such a soul have any additional knowledge? Did death reveal any of its secrets to its victims?

The tablets had shown her the past and other worlds. Could they show her the afterlife as well, or would it only be muddied like when she tried to look into the future?

She swallowed her last bit of food, and made a decision. Tonight, she would learn firsthand.

XII

The night proved to be a cloudy one, and neither the moon nor the stars could be clearly seen.

Up in her rooms, Inana wore a dark cloak to keep warm. The seven Me' tablets were arranged in a circle, and torches flickered on the walls.

She raised her hands over the tablets, and began to chant, repeating formulas inscribed on the tablets themselves. She once again saw visions of times past, but ignored them. She tried to push on past the visions of the living world.

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The old visions faded, and she felt only a sense of something very far away. She tried to focus, to get a look at what was there, but could see nothing. There was a sense however, of people walking way of in the distance.

She tried to reach out to them. For a moment, she feared that it would be one of the gods but the minds she brushed were human, so she felt encouraged. However, none of them seemed to take notice of her, as if she were calling out but too far away to be heard. Gritting her teeth, she tried again.

Then, she felt another sensation. As if someone had turned around to look at her. She tried again, but the feeling was fading. She blinked, and it was gone. Her eyes watered, and she shook with the effort, but thought she had failed.

Until she saw a shadow of a man standing in the middle of the tablet circle, over the seventh

one.

Inana gasped. She had succeeded after all; she'd summoned a dead man into the world of the living. The figure looked around slowly, getting used to its surroundings. Then, its form cleared and she saw none other than her old servant, Tammuz.

"Inana, Inana," the figure said slowly. "Why do you

summon me?" "Tammuz," she breathed. "Why do

you speak to me thus?"

In life, Tammuz had never failed to show courtesy, even in their occasional intimate moments. Indeed, he had often shown offense when others failed to pay her full respect. Now, his tone was one of familiarity, lacking any reverence for

her whatsoever.

“Death removes all distractions,” he told her. “Here, all are the same.” “Where?” she breathed. “Where have you been?”

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“Why do you ask?”

“The city is dying, Tammuz,” Inana said. “I need help if we’re going to survive here. I don’t know how much you can see from the other side of life, but…”

“Leave.”

She looked at him in shock. “You would never have said that before. You considered nomads to be more animal than men. Indeed, men build up not wander in the dust.”

The shade of Tammuz said nothing, but seemed to consider. “You think what lies beyond will give you power over what is happening?” he asked. “There are realms here. One is the home of the ageless god. There he and his dwell in peace. Would you go there?”

“No,” she shuddered. “Not there.”

Tammuz shrugged. “It is well. I am barred from there, and don’t think it likely that you could gain admittance either.”

“What of the other realm?” she asked.

“Where all who aren’t with the ageless god are. It is fragmented, and filled with even more strife than the world of the living. Only in the ageless god’s world is there peace.”

“But no freedom,” Inana said. She sighed. “What else have you

learned?” “Nergal is there. Nergal and others even worse.”

“I mean is there any way to bypass the realm? To stay here, in life?

To restore life?” “I know not.”

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“Show me what you do know.”

She tried to reach out with her mind, and touch his, but only felt emptiness. It wasn’t as if Tammuz resisted her, but she could still feel nothing.

“I cannot show you that way,” Tammuz told her. “It must be

experienced.” “You mean…I can cross over? While still

alive?”

She couldn’t believe that. Here was the chance she had been looking for. If there was any way to gain knowledge and power, this would be a means of doing so firsthand.

Yet, at the same time, she was well aware of the danger. Her own sister had been lost to Nergal. At all costs, she wanted to avoid the attention of that one. She would have to sneak in and spy out the nether regions, not enter it as a conqueror. True, part of her revolted against that, but she had no real choice.

“Take me where you are,” she ordered. “Keep me clear of the evil gods, and if I can, I will use whatever I learn to help you too.”

Tammuz nodded. He looked at her intently, and put out his hand. Inana reached back out and took it. To her surprise, it was corporal, albeit cold and clammy.

She blinked, and suddenly, she was no longer in her palace. Instead, she and Tammuz stood in a dark cave that she had never seen before. A dull red light kept the place form being pitch black, but the air was stale and devoid of life.

She looked around and shivered despite the robe. For this wasn’t like the

visions in the Me’. It was real; she was truly in another world.

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Tammuz stood beside her, and pointed down the path. “Come and see,” he told her.

She looked at him, for now, he was less of a shadow, and more the man she remembered. He seemed to see her better as well, for he bowed, and his eyes seemed to gain more of the respect and admiration they had had for her in life.

“It is good to be at your side once more, my queen,” he said.

She went to him slowly and, to both their surprise, actually embraced him, realizing how much she had missed him. They had been comrades and occasionally, more. While there had never been talk of marriage, she realized that if she would have ever married, it would have been to him. He had been brave and strong, completely loyal and, most importantly, represented a simpler time in her life. Before the plagues and pains of leadership outside the battlefield.

He released her, and they began to walk down the path for what seemed a very long time. She tried to engage her old bodyguard in conversation a few times, tried to see if she could learn more from him about the experience. But Tammuz had never been a talkative person in life, and death only seemed to cement that.

After a while, she felt fatigued and stopped to rest. Tammuz looked back at her.

“Rest awhile,” he suggested. “It is safe here. I will watch for any spirits that may come your way.”

“How far are we from the answers?” Inana asked.

“Far enough for now.” He sat on the ground and motioned for her to do the same. “Rest.”

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She looked around and inclined her ears. She could neither see nor hear anything. They both lay down, and Tammuz put his arm around her. She leaned against him, feeling more relief, ease, and tenderness than she had in a very long time. Slowly, hesitantly, she eased into a deep sleep.

XIII

Ninshabar took a walk through the streets of Apsu in the early morning. She had been dismissed by Inana last night, and had been given instructions not to disturb her until she summoned her back. It was just as well; she hated the unclean rituals her mistress had gotten into since her encounter with Enki.

She rued the day that Atrahasis had told her about the filthy old man. Her queen had gone

there and never been the same. It was if Enki's mire had worked its way into her very soul and would never get out. Worse, her mistress had chosen it. She had not been forced into it, nor had she been driven to it by uncontrolled emotion. It was something tragic, but not sympathetic, although Ninshabar did feel pity for the queen.

She supposed that she really couldn't blame Atrahasis for any of it. He hadn't wanted to tell them where Enki lived. He hadn't known about the Me'. He had been continuously discouraging her from using the dark powers she was gaining.

Who really loved her city and her queen more? The one who never questioned her or the one trying to prevent her from going down darker and darker paths? She feared Atrahasis had been right all along and now he was gone.

She was so caught up in her own thoughts that she didn't see the dark

shadow standing in a doorway that she passed. A man, one of the city guards, emerged from the door and followed her for a

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few steps. She took no notice, and the guard looked around, made sure that no one else was in the alley, and grabbed her.

Ninshabar tried to scream in surprise and fear, but the man clamped a hand over her mouth so tightly that she couldn't even bite it. Then, still looking around, he pulled her into the doorway.

She thrashed, and tried to break free, fearing that she would face what she had avoided in Enki's house. Another man came up, and shut the door. She was spun around to see an entire group of men.

There, in their midst, was Atrahasis.

He held up a hand in a calming gesture. "Please, Ninshabar. You are safe. We trailed you only because we must speak with you."

She stopped screaming through her captor's fingers, but still struggled to get free. How could she possible feel safe when she had been yanked in like this?

"Ninshabar, please," he continued. "You must trust me. I won't harm you. Have I ever threatened you or even spoken crudely in your presence?"

He hadn't, and had been one of the few men who had ever shown her full courtesy at all times. It was why she had liked him so much, although it didn't change her being held now. Was she safe? Dare she trust?

He looked at her intently. "I will have the guard release you. But you must promise not to scream."

Slowly, she nodded. The man released her then, and she looked warily at Atrahasis for a moment.

“How did you get back in here?” she asked at last.

Atrahasis pointed to the guards. “Some of those here are sympathetic to the plight of the

people in the city. “They donate some of the food to the people who need it most. They smuggled me back in the house because I have been in communication with them for some time.”

“Why?” Ninshabar asked, her unease returning. Theft had been a growing problem for days now, and here were several high ranking Apsu confessing their crimes to her.

“Ninshabar. Something must be done. Inana needs to see reason. She can’t keep tightening her grip on the people. Yes, times are hard, but she is either going to break them or…”

“Or what, Atrahasis?” she asked. “What are you saying?”

“She is going to cause the people to revolt. Many in the underground here

already want to.” “So, am I a prisoner?” she demanded, speaking more

boldly than she felt. “Listen, I know

nothing. I’m not a guard or counselor, or anything. I’m just a queen’s servant.”

“You are the closest thing she has to a friend,” Atrahasis pointed out. “If she would listen to anyone, it would be you.”

“Inana does as she will,” Ninshabar argued. “You know that.”

“Still, you have access to her,” Atrahasis persisted. “If she can’t be persuaded to listen, maybe we could get one of the Me’ tablets.”

“So, that is what you want? No! I won't steal from my queen,” she shot back. “Inana’s family took me in when I was a child. I’ve always been loyal. Even though you may be right, even though you may revolt, I won’t be a traitor.”

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She shook with anger, fear and dismay. She should have seen these things coming. Inana herself should have seen all this coming. Why should their beginning rebellion fall on her, the handmaiden?

“There’s someone else you should meet,” Atrahasis said, quietly. He took her by the arm, and led her farther into the building. The guards continued to stand at the door, lest either their fellows or a group of prowlers find them out.

Walking down a hall, Atrahasis and Ninshabar came to a dimly lit room. A woman was lying in bed, and another man, a civilian, was seated at a chair next to her. A few rotting scraps of food were by the woman’s head, and her eyes were closed.

Atrahasis walked in and nodded to the man. “How is she?” he asked.

“The same,” the man replied. “Ever since the prowler attacked her, she’s grown weaker every moment. We don’t talk anymore, but I think she has to bet better sometime.”

Atrahasis nodded, and gravely looked at Ninshabar. The handmaiden felt a wave of compassion for the man. Prowler bites could often cause disease, given the filthy nature of their creation. It was one of many things she wished had never happened over the past year. But that still wouldn’t make her become a traitor.

The man reached over to his wife, and gingerly stroked her hair. Then, he picked up a piece of food from where it was on her bed. He held it up to her mouth, but she showed no sign of noticing, let alone responding.

“Come on, my love,” he whispered. His hand trembled slightly. “Please eat.”

Atrahasis looked down, and shuffled his feet nervously. Ninshabar watched as the man placed the food to her lips repeatedly with no success. Then, she walked forward, and picked up another piece of food.

“Here, let me,” she offered.

The man stood back and allowed Ninshabar to do the same thing he had been trying. She had no luck getting the woman to eat either, and when she leaned in closer, she found out why.

The woman had been dead for several days. There was no breath, the body was stiff, and already a faint unpleasant odor could be detected. Ninshabar looked back at the man, sitting there stone faced. She gently put a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry,” she told him.

“The famine and the beasts affect us all,” the man replied. “I’m lucky she survived. Who knows when she will wake up, though?”

“No, I’m sorry but…she’s dead,” Ninshabar told him, figuring that it hadn’t sunken in yet.

His eyes narrowed in confusion. He got up, leaned over his wife’s face, and then sat back down. “She’s just tired,” he told her. “She’ll wake up soon.”

“But…she’s not breathing,” Ninshabar protested. “Can't you smell…?”

Atrahasis began waving for her to be quiet, and the man began rocking

slowly in his chair. “She’s just asleep,” he said more adamantly. “She’s not

dead. She’s not dead! She’s going to

wake up soon, she’s…”

“Of course she is,” Atrahasis interrupted. He pushed Ninshabar out of the room, and laid his own hand on the man’s shoulder.

From the doorway, Ninshabar watched as the man looked up at Atrahasis. His eyes watered, and his lips trembled, and the handmaiden could see that he was mad. She shuddered at the sight of a man whose mind was even more broken than his body.

“She’s not dead,” he whispered. “She’s only asleep.”

“I know,” Atrahasis said, gently. “Just keep watching her.”

He turned and left, bringing the stunned Ninshabar back to the anteroom. She confronted him when they were out of the wretched man’s earshot.

“How long has he been like that?” she asked.

“A few days. Soon we will have to get the body away from him and burned.”

He sighed. “Do you see now why I said what I said to the queen? Do you see what she and her beasts are doing to us?”

“I…but how can I turn on her? She’s my queen. I can’t betray her.”

“You don’t think she’s betrayed us without even realizing it?” Atrahasis asked gently.

He tried to give her a comforting hug, but Ninshabar pushed him away. Mingled horror, fear, pity, and loyalty ran through her mind, even more than earlier this morning. What was the proper path?

“Listen, I don’t want to force you to do anything against your will. Just carry a message back to Inana. Tell her to relent, to destroy her prowlers and work at

cleaning the disease they bring. Tell her to

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show more consideration. We don't want to fight her, but if we must, will take the tablets by force and lead people out of the city. Will you tell her?"

Ninshabar looked down, still frightened and confused. But she finally nodded, and stepped towards the door. The guards stood aside, and she walked back into the streets.

Atrahasis stood in the doorway as the handmaiden

disappeared from view. "You send her on a hopeless

mission," one of the guards remarked.

Atrahasis paused, but then nodded. "Yes, I know. I hate to mislead her, but I'm hoping that if I follow her back, I can get one of the tablets from her. They are the source of Inana's powers."

He waited a few more minutes, then pulled a hood over his head, and went out into the streets.

XIV

Inana continued to sleep fitfully in the cave. Her vision blurred and she looked up at the cavern roof. All was still.

Then she felt something tugging at her robe. Looking to her side, she expected to see Tammuz.

Instead, a skeleton arm was draped over her. Alarmed, she turned, and saw that her ex warrior had burned into a skeleton dressed in tattered rags.

She cried out and jumped up. The skeletal Tammuz's hand closed over her robe, tearing it away.

Underneath, she wore no armor, just a body suit that left her arms and legs free.

Tammuz stood, and reached for her again. She was unnerved, and backed away warily. He advanced, and she concentrated on the spell from the Me’ tablet that had summoned him. Saying it in reverse, she held out her hands to him as if ready to physically hurl him back.

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“No! Nergal! Nergal!” Tammuz cried out.

Inana swore with fear and dismay. Nergal. He had been taken by Nergal as well, sometime after his death. The very being she had wanted to avoid knew she was here.

Fortunately, her spell worked, and Tammuz began to fade. He changed from a skeleton to a vague black outline. As he began to fade out, he reached out to her one more time.

“Keep me alive!” he shouted, perhaps as a plea for his former queen to deliver him from Nergal.

But he then disappeared, and Inana saw him no more.

Shaking, she tried to leave, but saw that a rock wall had appeared where she had come before. Ahead, she saw that the road turned a corner. While she now wanted only to leave, fearing that she had made a grave mistake, there was no other way out.

Inana felt fear as she realized that she was indeed under the home of Nergal. She only wanted to return to Apsu and her people, but no opening could be seen. Reluctantly, she turned around again to look at the passage.

It had shortened again, and Inana saw that another wall blocked her way. Then, a hand grabbed her and spun her around.

Suddenly, she was no longer in the cave, but stood in a cold dark room with a high ceiling. The ceiling glowed red as if fire burned behind it, and dark shapes flanked her on either side. She looked about frantically, and saw that the wall behind her contained a long spike. The wall in front had a throne where a familiar

figure stood by.

“Ereshkigal?” she asked in shock. “Is it you?”

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Her sister looked up at her, but said nothing. Then an invisible force hurled her backwards into the barb opposite the throne. She screamed and screamed as the sharp stone pierced her back. She
could feel her blood trickling down, although she couldn't turn to see. The pain was more excruciating than any wound she had ever suffered in battle. The pain was so great that she thought she would surely blacken out, but she didn't.

On either side of her, the black shadows shuddered and pulsated as though laughing. Ereshkigal only looked upon her with a stare that managed to be both sad and impassive at the same time, impossible though that was. The only sounds in the room were her screams.

Inana gasped, and tried to pull away, but that only made the pain worse. She thrashed, and looked around wildly even as her eyes watered, and her skin soaked with sweat. If Sin had been real, she would have cried out to him for mercy.

"No," she said aloud, through her cries. "No, I won't ask for mercy. I worship nobody! Nergal, show yourself! Finish me! I won't worship!"

From the throne, she heard mocking laughter. A shadow appeared there, and it coalesced into the face and form of Enki!

Nergal laughed at her. "You didn't expect this, did you? Thought you'd never see this face again after your betrayal?"

"No. That's not you," Inana said. She gasped as another surge of pain coursed through her.

"Of course not," Nergal mocked, still using Enki's form. "That old fool could never match wits against the ageless god. None of you could."

He stopped laughing, and his expression darkened. “Our race served him before yours even existed. One of the most powerful among us rebelled. His realm and the ageless god’s war without ceasing; the human world is simply caught in the middle.”

“You?”

“No. I stay on the sides, and bide my time. This world is in between yours and the world of the damned. The Inverted Kingdom. Some of you pass through here on their way to the rebel’s kingdom.”

He stood, and slowly approached her. “They I absorb into myself. Enki was one. Tammuz another. You see, what you want is safety. Safety for your people. Safety for yourself.”

He stood before her then. “There is only one way for anyone to be truly safe. That’s if there is no one else besides you.”

She noted that Nergal wore a robe that swirled around his chair and body. Ereshkigal stood behind him, and reached for it. Pulling it away, Inana saw that there was no body underneath, only the throne. A severed head was perched on the top of the throne, and this was what had been speaking to her.

Ereshkigal lifted the head in her hands and over her own head. She pointed it at her sister, and its eyes bored into her, and she felt like she was being pushed down a hole. Then she screamed, feeling his mind in her head, like a concussion. He struck her mentally again and again, and she felt more in danger than she had been even before.

Her concentration dimmed, and she began remembering things. No, not her

memories, nothing about her childhood or home. Other memories, terrible things that had been done and endured.

Nergal’s memories, she realized, not her own, were there now. His mind was trying to melt into hers.

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She thrashed once more, physically and mentally. She pushed and pushed and pushed. Then, Nergal staggered back, and she fell off the spike.

She hit the ground, aching. The sharp pain in her back and head slowly subsided, but a dull ache remained. Panting, she looked over at Nergal, and saw that he too had been knocked over. Slowly, both staggered to their feet.

“Such power, for a human,” Nergal muttered.

“You will not have me,” Inana replied. “Send me back. I don’t give myself to you as my sister

did.”

“No. But will you have what you wanted?” you asked. “I saw your mind just as you saw mine.

You think eternal life would be your

answer.” “What of it?”

“I could give that to you easily enough,” he told her. “Oh, I couldn’t protect you from illness or injury, but to stop your ageing…” He shrugged.

Inana didn’t answer for several minutes. It was true that she wanted it, but the god never gave, he only took.

“Now you are wondering the price,” he said. He chuckled at her look. “No, no. I’m not in your mind any more. You are just that easy to read, queen Inana. The price would be all the souls in your city.”

“No!”

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“But they would be safe,” he insisted. “Within me. Besides, doesn’t their ingratitude wear thin?

Wouldn’t you like to go back to only commanding those who love you?”

She clenched her fist in frustration. He had a valid point. “Yes,” she hissed, through clenched

teeth.

“Ah. So then. I will give you the ability to never age, and allow your troops to remain. In return, you will open the door between our worlds. I can’t cross over without being summoned. I can only

keep you from leaving.”

“Or else?” she asked.

He raised his eyebrows. “Or else we keep fighting. Forever. But that would be a waste of time and energy, wouldn’t it?”

She narrowed her eyes and took a step back. Nergal made no move, so she began to chant.

Although harder without the Me’ tablets, she could still reach out to them and use them to reopen the door. Behind her, a mist appeared, and she turned back to him.

“Now,” she said. “Give me what I want.”

“To give you immortality, you must be tied to me. Tied to the immortality of the Inverted Kingdom. I will do this by putting within you the remnant of Tammuz. He will be the link between us. Through this link, you will live forever. Your ability to summon and channel spirits will be stronger than even the tablets or Eyes of Sin. You will even be able to use him to move objects for you.”

She felt his mind touch hers, putting something there. The something was

familiar, and she felt it to be the remains of Tammuz’s soul. She felt his memories, and felt how he had once been human,

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had once loved her, and would have gladly become her husband, despite never showing it outwardly. She felt a pang of remorse; what had she done?

> Nergal smiled and the smile was, amazingly, more terrible on his face than it had been on Enki's.

He laughed, and laughed at her, and she felt her skin reddening in mingled rage and embarrassment. Little did she know, although she would soon see, that by giving her this piece of her lover, this absorbed soul, she would always feel the compulsion to open the door between worlds so that he could step through. Whether she liked it or not, she would do his bidding, even as she tried to escape it.

Then an unseen force violently hurled her through the mists.

XIV

At the base of the palace, Ninshabar looked around nervously. No one could be seen, and that was good, for she wanted to get to her mistress via the secret entrance to the palace. Ever since they were children, they had known about the stonewall lading directly to Inana's private chamber. A grandfather of hers had put it in case he had ever needed to escape.

Now, Ninshabar would use it to enter Inana's chambers. Her mistress had sealed herself in with the Me' tablets to conjure up who knew what. Ninshabar was frightened, even more so than she had been in Enki's house. Somehow, someway, she felt that after this day, nothing would ever be the same.

But what could she do? She loved her queen, yes, but she also loved her city. It was being poisoned; she had seen it firsthand. Prowlers roamed the streets, people died from plague, everyone was living in fear. It wasn't supposed to be this way. Atrahasis was right.

She thought of him suddenly. He had always been kind to her, always spoken to her as to an equal, not as a servant or would be lover. He had taught her many things, and told her about his own time in Enki's house. She could certainly relate to his loathing of that one. He had never been

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presumptuous, never tried to force himself on her the way most men did. No, he was wise and good, someone she could see herself…

She looked around one more time, pressed a block on the wall, and watched as the wall slid away. No, it was best not to think about anything until she did what she had to do first. She didn't notice that Atrahasis himself watched her from the shadows.

Ninshabar entered the passage, and climbed the stairs. It was dark and dusty and the handmaiden had to put out her hands to feel ahead. Slowly, she made her way to the top, and felt for the button to open the other panel. She found it, and the wall slid away.

Light flooded the passage, and Ninshabar bowed low. "My queen, forgive me," she began. "But I have terrible news."

She looked up, afraid but then surprised. Inana was nowhere in the chamber. Instead, the Me' tablets were on the ground, arranged in a circle. They glowed with an eerie light.

She blinked, and stood in the doorway, not sure what to do. Then, she felt something strange. She looked at the central tablet, and almost felt that it was calling to her. She heard no voice, but felt a definite compulsion in her mind.

"Who is there?" she asked. "Who

are you?" An answer came into her

mind. I am.

“I don’t understand,” she said to the empty room. Clearly, it wasn’t Sin, Nergal, or any known spirit. It was something else, something more.

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I am. Complete in myself. The beginning and the end. Father, Son, Spirit, three in one. Above and beyond time and space, bound by neither, author of both. I have no beginning, all else has its beginning in me.

I am.

Ninshabar oddly enough felt no fear. The thoughts were strange, but seemed to beckon her closer. She slowly approached the stones.

The ageless god. He had been waiting for her. She knelt down, and touched the central tablet. She felt warmth slowly make its way up her arm and her vision blurred. Like her mistress had told her about, she saw visions in her mind's eye. Ages past unfolded before her, so fast that she could hardly take it all in.

The ageless god had created all. But men and those now called demons had disobeyed, and thrown the world into chaos. It would only get worse as time went on. Unlike her mistress, Ninshabar found that she could look ahead to the future. While much of it was also shrouded in fog, she saw things there.

She saw men grow and change into distinct races. Each race of men fancied itself the greatest and there was war. Suffering and death could be seen everywhere, and Ninshabar felt tears streaming down her cheeks, especially since she saw that her own city in this future time would be forgotten.

Wait, not all was lost. There was a man, one who served the ageless god in that far away time. His children would form a nation through which the ageless god would reveal himself. The ageless god would walk among men then, and suffer greatly. But through him, many other nations and people would come to be blessed.

Time moved on, and other men were born and died. Ninshabar then saw something else.

Inana. Her queen was alive, all those years from now. She saw her mistress in a room, not unlike her chambers now, her visage fearsome, and terrible. She had grown to hate her life, and all that she saw. She was trying to give everything to Nergal. She had allied herself with that dark one at last, in exchange for eternal life. In this time, Inana regretted her choice, but it was too late for her. She had sealed her mind against the ageless god long ago; that was why she could see none of what Ninshabar was seeing now.

In this distant place and moment, long after she would be gone, long after the ageless god himself had come, Inana would be performing a dark ritual. Then, another appeared to challenge her. A strangely clothed man with pale skin, blue eyes, and a sad face entered Inana's chamber. The queen began screaming and running towards him, but the sad man carried a burning stick, which he then threw at the altar. The stick exploded, and while Ninshabar saw the man escape, Inana would be caught in the fire.

She gasped as she saw her mistress' fate. She stood, and dropped

the tablet. "Ninshabar?!"

She jumped and whirled around. A mist had appeared in the far wall. Inana was standing in front of it, stunned at finding her handmaiden there.

"What are you doing here?" Inana demanded. "I told you not to come in here."

She looked around, not believing that her handmaiden had willfully disobeyed her. She saw that her door was still locked and that Ninshabar had actually entered through the secret passageway. Then she saw her handmaiden holding one of the

tablets.

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Inana's shock gave way to anger. "What is going on here? You stealing from me? You would

dare?"

She had thought a lot on Nergal's offer since leaving his domain. And she had decided that he was right after all. Let the commoners go to him and let her have dominion over those who were worthy of leading. Where that left Ninshabar, she would find out now. For while loyal, Ninshabar was weak n her mistress' eyes. Inana could only truly respect the strong.

"My queen, no!" Ninshabar insisted. "I came to warn you."

Inana scowled and took a step forward. Her every move felt energized; she could tell that Nergal had spoken the truth about her living forever. She could feel strength, and felt the desire to use it.

"You had better do better than that," Inana whispered. "Or I'll have you whipped until you pass

out."

"My queen, forgive me! I wasn't stealing. I came in the back door because you locked the front.

I've seen Atrahasis and had to warn you."

"Atrahasis? Here?"

"Yes. He's going to rebel; men are in position to attack you if you

don't stand down." "Stand down? I stand down?"

Inana grabbed Ninshabar by the shoulders, and shoved her against the wall. The handmaiden cringed, and Inana slapped her.

"And how would you know this?" she demanded. "Are you with them? Is that

why you steal my tablets?”

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“No, the ageless god spoke to me,” Ninshabar pleaded. She held out her hands in placation. “Inana, I saw your death. You must leave these things!”

“Liar!” Inana punched her in the stomach. Ninshabar gasped as the wind was knocked out of her. She crumpled to the floor, and Inana grabbed her by the hair.

She pulled her handmaiden’s face back up, and glowered darkly. “All I have had to endure, and this comes my way too? My own household stealing and lying? I’m going to beat you and feed you to Nergal first!”

> Ninshabar felt more horror at the mention of the underworld god than the promised flogging.

However, her fear soon gave way to pain as Inana began punching her viciously.

From the hidden back door, Atrahasis peered in. he had followed Ninshabar, had hoped to stop Inana in the event that the handmaiden either failed or weakened. He had watched as she had been drawn in by the glowing tablets. Then when they revealed the ageless god to her, he too had seen the visions.

He ran in then, hoping to grab one of the tablets. He was saddened for Ninshabar, but he had to cripple Inana’s power. Entering the room, he looked as the queen savagely pummeled her hapless servant. No, he thought. I can’t just leave her.

He looked over at the table. Seeing a tray, he grabbed it, and ran over to her. Inana heard the footsteps, however, and turned. Atrahasis tried in vain to swing the tray at her. He was no warrior, though, and Inana sent him sprawling with a well aimed kick.

She did, however, stop beating Ninshabar in favor of advancing on him. He saw the handmaiden lean over and spit out a mouthful of blood. Her face and arms were badly bruised, but she appeared to have no broken bones.

Inana faced him, angrier than ever.

“So. You came back,” she said. “You put her up to this, didn’t you? Well then, you will die together.”

She turned and stood over the Me’ tablets. Atrahasis stood and the queen chanted quickly, causing a dark cloud to appear over the tablets. Shadows moved in and out of the growing mass, and Inana turned back to him.

“It is done,” she said. She advanced on him and he backed away. She had forgotten Ninshabar temporarily, and the handmaiden struggled to get to her feet. Her eyes briefly met Atrahasis’, but he tried to keep Inana’s attention on him.

The cloud began to slowly pulse, and expand, and Ninshabar looked at it, shuddering. Then, she looked at tablets. Panicked, she reached out and grabbed the central Me’ tablet.

It burned her hand, and she cried out, alerting her mistress. Inana whirled around, but Ninshabar pulled the tablet out of the circle. It lost its glow and heat, and Ninshabar backed away.

“No! You fool!” Inana cried. Above them, the cloud began to strobe erratically. Shadows flew back into it, and the sounds of howling could be heard.

“Ninshabar! Run!” Atrahasis shouted. “Go!”

Inana turned and punched him, and then ran up to her handmaiden.

Ninshabar, however, was at the back door, and running down the passageway.

Inana tried to follow, but Atrahasis reached out

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and grabbed her around the waist. Inana snarled, and threw him off, but it slowed her down long enough to turn back to the cloud.

It was growing more unstable now, and Inana frantically began chanting over the remaining tablets, trying to calm the disturbance. However, it was too late. The mists enveloped both her and the broken circle of tablets, and Atrahasis heard Inana scream.

Frightened, he ran down the steps and out of the secret entrance. He slammed into Ninshabar, and saw that there were several prowlers in the back alley, facing them. She clutched the central tablet close, and didn't know whether running back inside would do any good or not.

Then, the prowlers howled and fell to the ground. The pair watched, stunned as the monsters dissolved. Had they succeeded, then? Was the spell broken?

An explosion from the top of the palace answered them. They looked up to see debris falling down towards them. Atrahasis grabbed Ninshabar and they began to run pas the dead prowlers just as a large stone fell down.

As they ran out of the alley and into the main street, they saw that people were standing in front of their homes. They were shouting and pointing, so Atrahasis turned back to look at the palace.

More stones were crumbling at the top of the palace. Lightning flashed in the windows, and the dark cloud hovered overhead. Atrahasis and the people in the city felt a new sense of fear.

"Run!" Atrahasis shouted again. "To the gates! To the gates!"

People began to panic, and ran out in the streets. Soon pushing gave way to

fighting, especially near the city's front gate. Utu and other guards were shouting orders, and trying to halt the dozens of

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people trying to push out. The guards had no choice but to draw their swords and begin cutting down the rowdiest men in front of them.

The rioters responded in kind, picking up stones and grabbing wooden staffs from nearby homes. They then began attacking their tormenters, months of frustration boiling over into full blown rage. The fear from the rising cloud over the palace didn't help matters.

Ninshabar and Atrahasis tried to stand on the edge of the crowd, both to protect themselves, and to protect the tablet. They turned around, and saw the cloud condense into a distinct black orb that blocked out the sun. Pale lightening flashes struck out, hitting the buildings surrounding the palace.
Large chunks of stone rained down, making the ground shake and the air fill up with a dull roar.

On the city wall, a few guards tried to throw spears into the crowd. But most were paralyzed with fear themselves at the rising mist. Then another flash struck the wall, bringing down an entire section. Utu, meanwhile, ran out the hole with a few of the guards.

The riot soon turned into a full blown dash for freedom. Dozens of citizens made for the open hole, trampling the remaining guards. Atrahasis and Ninshabar made a point of finally escaping themselves. They ran through, and found that the crowds were dispersing into the desert. Some looked like they might be heading to the farms, but most simply ran without any plan or thought other than escape.

More lights flashed, and more buildings fell. As they made their way further from the crowd, Ninshabar and Atrahasis could see that only some of the people were successfully making it out. Most were being buried under the collapsing city.

Their worst fears were being realized. In trying to save the people, they had destroyed them.

It was over.

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Ninshabar felt tears streaming down her face. Her home, all she had ever known, was crumbling before her. Her queen, whom she had thought her friend, had betrayed them all. In trying to stop her, the city was simply being destroyed faster. Everything had been in vain, and now the underworld god would take all their souls to finish it.

Then, something else happened. The central Me' tablet began to glow again. She held it up, and felt the ageless god calling her again. No, this was not the end. The city would die, but the spirits could be pushed back. Then, the souls of the people at least would escape Nergal to be judged according to how they stood in the ageless god's eyes.

How? She thought. What must I do?

Open her mind. Let the ageless god work

through her. Why? He doesn't need me.

It pleases him to work through his servants.

She held up the tablet. It began to shine brightly, so brightly that the startled Atrahasis had to shield his eyes. Other refugees looked over at the new source of light in wonder as the orb over the city began to shrink. Ninshabar felt as though all the energy of the sun was coursing through her, exhausting her, causing her vision to blur.

At the distance where they stood, they saw the city continue to fall down, even though the cloud lost its hold. Then with one last effort, Ninshabar cried out. She saw nothing, but rather felt power leap from the tablet. The orb shriveled up, and vanished, and the last part of the outer wall crumbled into a

heap.

Then, everything went dark for her.

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XVI

The sun rose to a pile of rubble, dead bodies and shattered dreams. Standing over it, Inana, former queen of the dead city, looked upon the desolation with impotent fury. She had been pulled back into Nergal's kingdom during the confusion, and had seen the doorway between worlds close. She had jumped back out in time to avoid becoming trapped, but it made little difference now.

> Nergal didn't have the souls of the weak. She didn't have the strong to keep serving her here.

She had no city, no army, nothing. Only her remaining tablets, diminished power, and endless life remained.

Ninshabar and the other survivors would be gone now, fleeing to whatever new home they could find to start over. She glowered at a pile of rocks, and kicked it over. The kick hurt, and she screamed audibly.

"Ninshabar!" she shouted to the still air. She would look for her former servant. Yes, and the traitor Atrahasis as well. They were to blame; they had turned on her and disrupted her spell. She swore to Nergal himself that if she ever found them, she would torment them until they begged for death. She would seek out any family, any friends of theirs, and blot out all traces of them.

She imagined capturing her handmaiden and beating all the beauty and health from her face. Ringing her hands, she thought of strangling Ninshabar. As her hands twitched, she noticed that a rock pile near her broke apart.

Surprise temporarily replaced rage. Had she done that? Had Nergal given her another power besides eternal life? She concentrated again, focusing her anger on another pile of stones. They too broke into dust, and Inana watched in delighted

surprise. What a gift! She had resources left after all.

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Smiling, she concentrated on the corpse of one of her citizens. She focused, willing his flesh and bone to disintegrate as easily as the rocks. To her surprise, however, nothing happened. Confused, she tried again, but the corpse remained untouched. Trying the rocks again, she did manage to destroy those, and concluded that this power only worked on nonliving objects.

She sighed. Everything had limits. Even she, although immortal, was not indestructible. If she was to have her revenge, she would have to be careful but then what? What reason did she have to go back to Nergal?

She heard a footstep, and turned around. There was Utu, approaching her. When he saw who she was, his face took on a look of pure wonder. He slowly approached and kneeled at her feet.

"You live! I knew you would." He looked up at her with reverence and love. "I saw you demonstrating your new powers as well, my queen. Now I see that you are indeed a goddess."

"And you Utu?" Inana asked. "Are you the only one left me?"

"No, my queen. Dozens of us escaped the destruction of the city. We are considering trying to find the house of Enki, but I decided to take one last look to see."

He trailed off and bowed again. Relief flooded through Inana, as well as a renewed sense of hope. So, she still had people to rule after all. True, any new kingdom would be small, especially at first, but it would be a start. She still had six of the Me' tablets, as well as the less powerful, but still potentially useful Eyes of Sin. If she could ever recover the seventh, she could bring Nergal down on all who

would not serve her. She could have her vengeance and her kingdom all in one.

"Take me to our people, brother," Inana whispered. "We will begin again. We will triumph. This will be a sign for you all; I will live forever. All of our children and their children will know me."

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Ninshabar awakened to find herself in a soft warm bed. She looked around and saw that she was in one of the farm houses that belonged to Apsu. Seated next to her, she saw Atrahasis. As her mind cleared, she thought of the irony of being in a similar place to where they had first met.

He smiled, stood, and gently hugged her. “You’re safe,” he told her. “A few of the people are with us. We thought we would rest here until you were well, and then move on.”

He looked at her. “What you did, back at the city. It was very brave.”

“The city,” she whispered. She remembered it all. She sat up in the bed, and put her head in her hands, weeping softly. Atrahasis reached for her again, but she shook her head.

“Let me,” she said. “Let me grieve.”

And she did. She wept for the loss of home, of all that was familiar, and all the people who didn’t escape in time. She wept for Inana, her queen, her friend, who had now become her greatest enemy. Had she done the right thing? True, the souls were saved, but if she hadn’t tried to grab the
tablets in the first place, would there have been something else she could have done? Would she ever know?

As she wept, she felt the central Me’ tablet next to her in bed. Through it, the ageless god whispered to her, giving her comfort and assurance. With it, however came a warming.

Inana was still alive.

However, she was weakened considerably. Although she would remain a great evil, she would be overcome in time. For now, Ninshabar would be the keeper of the tablet. She would have much left

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to do in this life. The, she could stand before the ageless god, without shame and without fear. She would know that she had done all he had wished of her.

“Please,” Atrahasis said, trying once again to hold her. This time, she allowed it, and felt his warm embrace. “Let me help you. Whatever happens, let us face it together.”

She nodded, and put her own arms around him. “Yes,” she agreed, her eyes still glistening. “Together.”

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House of Silence

Prologue

The sun rose on the mountains, banishing the early morning chill from Jeremiah's bones as he watched his flock of sheep. They were grazing along one of the fertile plains while his father and brother worked in a small garden. Beyond the plain floated a small tributary of the Euphrates River

Jeremiah and his family lived in the northern region of what was once in Mesopotamia but was now part of the Ottoman Empire. He reflected on the fact that while this place changed little over the years, the outside world was changing rapidly. New lands had been discovered a few centuries ago, and the nations of Europe were clamoring for land and power and wealth.

Sometimes he wondered what it would be like to leave the plans and mountain cave where they had lived for ten years. But fear kept them back. Not necessarily his own, but his father's.

While a small boy, they had lived in a town. Life had been easier and more pleasant until a strange plague had hit. Several had grown sick with respiratory infection, and died, his mother among them. But eh most unnerving part of it all was that some had claimed to see shadowy figures walking through the houses of the dead and dying.

That was when Jeremiah's father, Gershom, had packed his things and taken his boys into the wilderness. Along the way, he told them about the shadows, about how they were evil spirits behind the plague. That was when he had first shown them the tablet and began his almost nightly ritual of reciting their family history.

Jeremiah looked up to see that the son was beginning to set. His brother, Daniel, and his father would already be back at their cave. Standing up, he stretched, herded his sheep together, and began the long trek back home.

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The moon was rising by the time he reached the base of the mountains. Gershom and Daniel were roasting a few chunks of lamb and vegetables on a fire in front of the cave entrance. His older brother looked up, and waved. Daniel was a tall, lanky young man of twenty with black hair and eyes, similar to Jeremiah but with an added five years maturity.

Gershom looked up and narrowed his eyes to make out his son and animals in the dark. Sullen and grizzled, the years had not treated his appearance kindly, but his muscles were still strong and powerful from years of toil. He nodded once, and pointed to the cave entrance.

“Put the sheep away, and get some water to douse the fire,” he said.

“Dinner’s almost ready.” “Yes, father,” Jeremiah replied dutifully.

“Did you see anyone today?” Daniel

replied. “No one.”

Gershom nodded. “So much the better.”

He pulled the food off the fire and began putting it into clay bowls at his side as Jeremiah led the flock inside. At the entrance, there was a makeshift pen he used to keep the sheep in one place. He deposited his charge there, and walked a few feet back. On one side were their sleeping mats and a few clothes and other odds and ends. On the other side were several jars containing their food and water. Jeremiah looked down and noted that the water was almost out. Tomorrow, they would probably have to make the long trek back to the river to refill.

Sighing, he took a jar and went back outside, noting the crunch of gravel as he did so. Gershom always kept gravel sprinkled several feet around the entrance

to keep anyone from sneaking up on them in the night. No visitors ever came around this desolate place, so any one coming would be an enemy.

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Jeremiah poured the water on the fire, and the family watched as the embers went out.

Unfortunately, there would still be some smoke, but that couldn't be helped. Gershom looked around one last time, and then motioned his sons inside.

They sat down next to the sheep pens, set their food in front of them, and said a quick prayer.

For despite their isolation, Christian missionaries had made their way to this area before the seventh century, and had made a few converts, Gershom's family among them. Before they had fled, they had even owned a few scrolls of scripture.

They ate in relative silence, but also in peace. Jeremiah relished the roasted meat and vegetables after a long day in the sun. Soon, Gershom would tell them of their ancestors, and then they would head to their beds for the night.

As though hearing his thoughts, Gershom stood and went for his blanket. Fishing through it, he brought out a stone tablet that always remained hidden there. Then, because night had fallen, he lit a small torch in the back of the cave, just before it branched into tunnels that led deep into the mountain.

Without needing to be told, the brothers joined their father around the tablet. As they all sat down, Jeremiah noted the extreme age and wear on the stone. Covered in strange markings that resembled wedges, Gershom had told them that the symbols were writing of a kind no longer written, but that told secrets not meant for men to know.

"Once, many thousands of years ago," Gershom began. "Our first mother, Ninshabar, and first father, Atrahasis, were the subjects of Queen Inana. Inana was once a mighty and noble warrior. But her heart grew proud and her ambitions

exceeded what any human needed or deserved.

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“So she allied herself with Nergal, a demon who caused sickness and death. In return for eternal life, and seven tablets that could call forth Nergal and his foul spirits, she agreed to release the demon upon the world.

> “They would have spread disease and death on the race of man, and consumed their very souls.

But Inana, the necromancer, the enemy, was thwarted by Ninshabar and Atrahasis, who stole this.”

Gershom pointed down at the tablet before continuing. “This is the greatest of the tablets, the central one that gives the others most of their power. Inana lacks the power and strength to create another, and without this, she can’t bring Nergal to the world to rule with her.

> “But she can yet do evil in the short term. She can summon other, lesser spirits that can still

cause plague. She has human followers and, it is said, unnatural monsters with her. That’s why I knew she was close when I heard of the shadows among the sick and dying back at our home. That’s why we fled.”

He looked at his sons gravely. “For thousands of years, our family has kept the seventh tablet hidden. From parent to child has it been passed down and kept from the rest of the world. Even our other relatives know nothing of it. As it should be. Never must Inana hear of it. Never must it fall back into her hands.”

“But father, I don’t understand,” Daniel spoke up. “Why not just destroy it? Then the necromancer would be crippled forever.”

“It has been suggested before,” Gershom answered. He pointed to a corner which had been sliced off. “Some of our family has even fought for it to be so. But Inana may find another way.”

“But we wouldn’t have to run and hide anymore,” Daniel replied, and even Jeremiah had wondered that from time to time.

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“Would we?” Gershom asked. “You must realize, Daniel, that in addition to her arrogance,

Inana’s strongest feelings are rage and obsession. Never will she stop coveting the tablet as long as it exists. Never will she forgive the children of Atrahasis and Ninshabar as long as they stand in her way.”

Gershom paused and looked at his two sons sternly. “And as long as we keep that obsession alive, as long as don’t escalate but keep just out of her reach, she will keep chasing us without hurting others or finding another way to bring forth Nergal.”

He stood and put out the torch. “Now, let us go to sleep.”

Reluctantly, the boys crawled to their sleeping mats in the darkness, and drifted into a light doze. Their father had taught them to not sleep too deeply, lest they one night have to pack and flee like they did before.

Jeremiah listened as Daniel tossed and turned, and wished his brother could come to terms with their situation. Yes, he too grew tired of hiding. He too wanted to see more of the world than their dry, dusty cavern. But he understood their father’s words, and remembered his mother and the other villagers. And truth be told, there was peacefulness to life here. Maybe one day they could find wives and move away. But for now, there was peace and quiet, and Jeremiah felt himself drifting off to sleep.

A faint crunching sound jolted all three awake. Something had disturbed the ground outside. Jeremiah looked up. The opening of the cave revealed the dark skies of the dead of night. While they had seen no other human being in a decade,

occasionally a desert animal would prowl by. Still, no chance could be taken.

"To the back," Gershom whispered tensely. The boys didn't need to be told twice. Slowly, silently, they made their way to the tunnel in the back. Straining his ears, Jeremiah tried to hear if

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another crunch of gravel sounded. It didn't, and that made them all more nervous. An animal would just keep poking around, but a human, particularly one who would be trying to sneak up on them…

The three reached the tunnel. Gershom had long ago cleared any loose rocks and debris here, so that they could stand and move relatively quickly. In exploring the tunnels, Gershom had found a small crawl space about a hundred feet down the path. There, they could hide the rest of the night before making their way back out. Hopefully, a pursuer would keep going down the caves and either get lost or give up.

Once or twice before, they had had to come down here only to find animal tracks and their food jars broken the next morning. Convinced that no human had seen their dwelling, Gershom had stayed. If there had been any doubt, they would have run once again.

Jeremiah carefully counted his paces to ensure he reached the right spot, even in the darkness. Reaching where he thought the crevasse would be, he reached down and felt a small hole in the bottom of the wall. He knelt down and jumped in the hole.

Abruptly, a hand clasped over his mouth, and he felt another clasp him to the floor. "Jeremiah," Daniel's voice whispered in his ear.

Jeremiah nodded frantically, and his brother released him. They crawled single file through the eighteen inch hole until they reached a space about ten feet down that opened up enough for them to sit up but not stand. Jeremiah heard Gershom's breathing in the dark, and knew they were all together.

“I have the tablet,” Gershom whispered. “Stay quiet.”

Jeremiah waited in the tense darkness. For several minutes, they all strained their ears for a sound, any sound that would reveal their pursuer. No sound came, however, and Jeremiah wondered if maybe, just maybe, it would only turn out to be a wild animal.

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Then a light could be seen outside the crawl space, dispelling that hope forever. Someone had lit the torch up in their home, and had brought it down here to search. To his growing fear and apprehension, Jeremiah noted that the light grew stronger, and stronger.

Finally, they heard another soft footstep, and a face peered in at them. From the torchlight cast by the torch in his hand, Jeremiah could see the face of an ugly, dark haired and dark eyed man, leering smugly at them. Around his neck, he wore an opal necklace carved in the shape of a crescent moon.

The man laughed when he saw them. “So, Gershom,” he called out. “Has all your running come to this? Skulking in a cavern with your two brats and your stolen treasure?”

“I’ve come farther in life than you ever will, Amnon,” Gershom retorted. “Oh yes, I recognize you. You sought out the enemy and found her at last, did you?”

Amnon, the man, laughed again. “Gershom, I admit, when you came to the village, I knew you had secrets. Somehow, I knew. When I persuaded you to tell me what you hid from, I though you mad. But I looked, just in case, to see if there was any danger.”

“I see you failed to heed it.”

“Come. Let us talk more openly,” Amnon answered, beckoning.

None of them moved, so Amnon withdrew his head. Jeremiah thought he heard muttering, but couldn’t make out the words. Then, a low rumble could be heard. The ground underneath them began to shake. The sound grew louder, and increased to a roar.

Suddenly, a crack opened in the crawlspace's opening. The crack grew, crumbling the rock next to them and opening the crawlspace to the wider cavern. There, they saw Amnon standing, clutching his strange medallion, which seemed to glow with an eerie white light.

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The roof above them began to rumble and crack. With a cry of fear, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Gershom jumped out of the crawlspace as it collapsed behind them. Jeremiah could have sworn that he heard voices and felt a cold feeling around him.

He shuddered as they tried to back away from Amnon. Never had he imagined that such power could exist. Never had he thought that it could be wielded.

“Yes, Gershom, I found her,” Amnon told them. “Inana, queen of ages past. Ishtar, Astarte, Ashtoreth, Medea, the necromancer. Call her what you will. For me, her name was power. Power to transcend this life. She gave me this.”

He pointed to his necklace. “The Eye of Sin. Made by her and enchanted by her sister. A way to communicate with the spirit world, with Nergal. Inana gave it to me, in return for you and yours.”

“You were the one who told her we were in your village, weren’t you?”

Gershom said. “This was too great a gift. I learned more from it than

you could ever know.”

“What did you learn? Was it worth your soul?”

“My soul? That is just what Inana, myself, and her other servants wish to preserve.”

For the first time, Amnon’s smugness faltered. His eyes darted back and forth nervously. “Nergal will come, Gershom. Yes, he and his fellow spirits. They will spread their plagues until all are

dead, and they will feed on the human souls. They will possess and walk in human

skin. In the end, all will be gone. Except Nergal. And except Inana's followers. Those he will spare. Those I will be with. Don't you see? Nergal's coming is inevitable."

"Not without that which he needs to enter the world," Gershom answered.

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“He will find a way. Best the necromancer herself herald his arrival.” Amnon drew a knife. “Give me the tablet.”

Gershom held even tighter to the ancient stone. “I will not!”

Amnon took a step forward, and frowned. “Maybe I’ll let your boys go if you do. Or I’ll take them to the necromancer, and soon they’ll beg her to feed them to the prowlers.”

He put a hand to the medallion once more. They heard him mutter the name of Nergal, and other things they couldn’t understand.

If possible, the cavern grew colder. A large, dark figure began to appear behind the assassin. Its outline blurred with Amnon, and the voice of the assassin changed, growing deeper, more ominous, and less human.

“Fool! The assassin gave himself to me willingly. I have a hold in this world through the Eye. Soon, I will have a permanent hold. Give me what I want or, watch your brood die horribly.”

Gershom looked back at his boys, their faces white with horror. This was the voice of Nergal, demon of pestilence and eater of souls. There would be no bargaining or escape. His only goal was to destroy all, until only he remained.

But he would not get his sons. Gershom would see to that. Quickly, he pushed the tablet at Daniel, who fumbled but held on to it.

“I love you. Run!” Gershom stood, ran towards Amnon/Nergal, and slammed into the possessed man. Nergal snarled like some wild beast, and plunged the

dagger into his chest. Gershom screamed, but fell forward with terrible purpose. Amnon’s heel slipped over the edge of the rock, and both fell into the chasm with mingled screaming and cursing.

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For a moment, there was silence. Then a sickening crunch was heard from far below, followed by Nergal's cry of rage getting fainter and fainter until Amnon, his 'hold' on the world of men, died.

The boys stood, and looked over the edge. Tears streamed their faces, and they shook with a fear that Jeremiah thought would never leave. Daniel, however, still had some wits about him, perhaps from actually holding the tablet.

He stood and addressed his brother. "We have to get out of here," he whispered. "We have to go away. Far away."

He ran back to the opening. "Come on, Jeremiah! Father's dead! We can't do any more. Come on!"

Jeremiah heard his brother as if from a distance. Blinking back fresh tears, he followed Daniel back to their home at the mouth of the cave, where his brother was hastily stuffing some food, the tablet, and some empty water jugs into a sack. Then he stood, and ran out of the opening, into the night.

Jeremiah stumbled past the sheep pens, and after a moment's hesitation, opened the gate so that they could escape. Somehow, he knew he would never see this place again.

"To the river! Come on!" Daniel yelled over his shoulder, never slowing down. Jeremiah ran after him, and ran, and ran, and ran…

I

In the countryside of France, several miles north of Versailles, a lone horse drawn carriage made its way down the pathway, through the forest. The man at the

front, Jean Ruthven, watched the passing trees with an equally passing interest. Dressed in fine, but somewhat out of fashion clothes, young

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Ruthven was the son of one of the many French ambassadors at court. As such, his family had some of the wealth and status of nobility. Enough to see that change was coming, and fast.

It was 1788. In the New World, the British Colonies, influenced by the ideals of Locke and Rousseau, had revolted against their English masters, and had proclaimed themselves a new nation. In the capital of his own country, the peasants were beginning to crumble, and speak similar words, only angrier.

Still, Ruthven found himself not entirely disagreeing with their view points. Why did some have to be so poor, while others so rich? What, if anything, could be done?

He felt a growing unease himself, a need for something more. To that end, he had been trying to become more independent of his servants. That was why he had learned to drive a carriage himself, and was driving his younger sister, Constance, her new husband, Roger de Beaumont, and Beaumont's brother, Roland, back to their home from Paris, where they were married.

Inside the carriage, Roland de Beaumont looked at his older brother and his brother's new bride, sitting across from him. The former Constance Ruthven was a slender, blue eyed girl of twenty, dressed in a lavender ballroom style dress and powdered wig. A bright, pretty girl, she had caught the eye of several of the young gentlemen at court. Nevertheless, her father promised her to the wealthy country gentleman his brother had become, despite being nearly thirty years her senior.

Roland suspected Lord Ruthven of having his own reasons, however. A seasoned diplomat and shrewd reader of people, he could see the growing discontent of the poor. In the event of violence breaking out in the capital city or

elsewhere, it would do the Ruthven family good to have a retreat in the country, particularly one not too far from the English Chanel, where they could escape the continent, if need be.

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Constance, obedient and sensible, had consented, although like most young people, was loath to leave the excitement and grandeur of the city. Indeed, the wariness she had shown when formally introduced to the de Beaumonts showed that she had been fully prepared to hate them. But Roger's kindness, patience, and courtesy had gradually won her over, and she now rested her head on his shoulder with, if not passionate love, at least a fondness that would compel her to remain faithful to them.

Roger, of course, already loved her dearly, and looked on his bride as a gift from God after all they had been through. Still good looking, his graying hair only gave him a distinguished air, and his bright dark eyes shone with life and love.

No one would ever have known that he had once been a frightened boy named Daniel or his brother the younger Jeremiah.

Roland, formerly Jeremiah, closed his eyes and sighed. Although younger, he looked older, owing to the fact that he still struggled with the fear, the fear born that night in the cave where they had faced Nergal. They had run through the desert for several nights, sleeping uneasily during the day, getting as far as they could in the cooler evening air. Always looking over their shoulders, expecting some unspeakable horror to be on their tail. Barely eating or drinking. Losing weight, skin burning.

By the grace of God, quite literally, they had stumbled on a small monastery in the Holy Land, left from the Crusades, and quietly weathering the intervening years and wars of history. Half dead, and completely delirious they had made it to the entrance and gotten the attention of the monks before collapsing.

Slowly, but surely, the monks had nursed them back to health. While the boys were careful not to reveal too much about their past, they conveyed that their father had died in a caving accident. They had no other family, and could they please stay with the order for a while?

The monks allowed them to stay and help tend their gardens. They educated them, and in a few months, made them new acolytes. Years passed, and the boys learned much about the Son of God and about the world.

Eventually, they persuaded their superiors to transfer them to a sister monastery in Beaumont, France, where they took their new names. For they never quite felt safe until they were on a new continent, and far from the land of their ancestors.

Although Roland remained in the monastery, a full brother in the order, Roger eventually left, and put his gardening experience into creating a successful winery. By and by, his wealth and connections grew, ending in his marriage. For he wanted only to put the past behind him, and live happily, far from family history.

Roland, however, still never felt safe unless he was in his cell back in the monastery. The tablet he had kept, explaining it away as being found by his father, and a memorial to him. Since he would now never marry, he supposed that the burden of the tablet would fall to the children of Roger and Constance. Roger had initially refused, but Roland had countered that he wouldn't officiate the wedding without this request granted.

Now that that was taken care of, it was just a matter of getting home. Soon, Roland thought, there would only be gardening in the monastery, followed by study and prayer at night. Safe, secure, and unassuming.

The carriage slowed down, snapping Roland out of his musings. He stuck his head out of the window to look at Ruthven.

“Why are we stopping?” he asked.

Their driver pointed ahead. “Someone’s haling us. Why I believe…yes, it’s Lord Bertilak!”

Roland looked ahead and down the road. Sure enough, he saw a bearded man in the unmistakable green attire of Lord Bertilak. The minor nobleman was well known at court, both for his love of a good time, and his flamboyant green clothes. Somehow, he had missed the wedding, having had business elsewhere. How he ended up here, none of them could say.

As the carriage pulled up, the small company saw Bertilak’s head bandaged, as though recently suffering a fall.

“My lord?” Ruthven asked. “Are you all right? Do you require

assistance?” “Ruthven, is it?” Bertilak asked, squinting up at the

other man.

“Yes.”

Bertilak smiled with apparent relief. “Ah, excellent. I wonder if you could give me a ride. I was alone on horseback when my horse threw me and ran off.”

“Are you hurt?”

“Fortunately, I fell into the bushes over there,” Bertilak replied, pointing behind him. “I broke no bones, but cut my head pretty badly.”

“Well, lord, I am headed north to Beaumont,” Ruthven said. “You are

welcome to join us if you wish. I am taking my sister to her new home after her wedding.”

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Constance poked her head out of the other window, and smiled politely. “Good day to you,

lord.”

“And to you, lady. A more lovely bride couldn’t be found, I’m sure. And you husband is?”

“Roger de Beaumont,” Constance answered as Roger looked out and

nodded his greetings. “Of course,” Bertilak smiled. “But… and I hate to

impose, but could the gentlemen be

persuaded to take a slight detour to the town of Mejnor? I’m afraid my

business lies there.” “Mejnor?” Roger echoed.

“A small town a few miles to the east, sir,” Bertilak explained. “On the banks of the Seine. I’m meeting with my good friend, Lady Viola Pisani.”

“Pray, who could that be, lord?” Constance asked. “I’ve not heard her name before.”

“No, lady. She is a foreigner, having purchased an old castle there with some of her countrymen. But she is gracious and fascinating company. I do enjoy my stays there. If you were to take me, surely she would welcome you as well.”

Constance looked at Roger, who thought for a moment, and then nodded. “I’m happy to help my fellow man,” Roger said. “Ruthven, help Lord Bertilak in. He can tell you the way to Mejnor.”

II

Roland sat in the now cramped seat next to Bertilak, wishing that they hadn’t picked him up. As uncharitable as that sounded, the man made Roland

uncomfortable, and not just because of the crowded ride. Something vaguely familiar, though not quite right, seemed to attach itself to the man, something beyond the typical decadence of aristocracy. What that was, he couldn’t quite say.

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Perhaps Bertilak realized that as well, for he spent most of his time chatting with Roger and Constance. Outside, the sun began to sink lazily in the sky. Roland looked out until he saw the small town of Mejnor getting in sight.

The forest gave way to farmland, dotted with small houses. The road widened somewhat about a mile ahead, where the church and other public buildings made up the main part of the village.

Dwarfing all of this, however, was a tall hill, on which stood a small castle. About three stories high and surrounded by a cluster of smaller, newer houses, its stones were solid black, and its ornate spires called to mind the early Gothic style of architecture. Gargoyles lined the outer wall, overlooking the road leading up to the main tower. There was no moat, but a thick wooden door barricaded the way in. Beyond the hill, he could barely make out the river Seine flowing in the distance.

The carriage passed through the town now, and Roland noticed something strange. The people on the road gave them a wide berth, which was expected, but they also kept their heads down, and seemed ill at ease. They passed the tavern, and the men eating outside stopped their conversation, and stared.

Then they passed the church, and the local priest stepped out on the front steps. He looked up, and his eyes met Roland’s. In the other’s eyes, Roland saw that which he was all too acquainted with. He saw fear.

The priest clasped his hands in front of him, and bowed his head, murmuring a prayer. Then he looked again upon them, and made the sign of the cross in the air. Roland tried to nod, to make some indication that he, too, was a man of the cloth, but the carriage kept moving on.

Roger, however, had also seen the priest’s strange behavior, and so asked Bertilak if he knew the reason behind it.

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“Well sir, small villagers dislike and distrust outsiders,” Bertilak said, shaking his head in

dismissal. “Particularly those of Mediterranean origin, where Lady Pisani and her servants are from. Memory of the Crusades, no doubt, colors the imaginations of unenlightened minds with unnecessary prejudices. It means nothing.”

“Lady Pisani is Italian, then?” Roger guessed.

“The lady has spent some time in Italy, yes,” Bertilak replied. “But she had travelled far and wide. She has a sharp mind that ever thirsts for more knowledge and experience.”

“My lord, what title does Lady Pisani hold?” Constance asked. “Countess? Baroness?”

“Just lady, dear Madame de Beaumont,” their guest replied with a smile. “Same as yourself.

Titles mean little to her these days.”

They began to move up the hill, and Roland looked out at the newer houses clustered on the path towards the castle.

They saw people moving about, going about their business to and from the fields, similar to the people in the older village. However, the people here were darker complected, and had features closer to those of Roland and Roger than native Frenchmen. Roland looked on them intently, reminded of his childhood village, so far away. Surely they were of the same stock.

But no, Bertilak had assured them that they were from the area around the sea, far away from where they would expect their enemies to dwell. Indeed, the people largely ignored them, showing neither welcome, hostility, or fear.

As they arrived at the front gate, two men could be seen flanking the entrance. Ruthven slowed them to a stop, and Bertilak climbed out to converse with the guards. After a moment, while their

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acquaintance explained the party that had accompanied him, the men nodded, and opened the door. Standing aside, Bertilak waved Ruthven in, and then followed the coach inside.

Ruthven pulled into a large, but barren courtyard. No grass grew here, only dead weeds and thorns, suggesting a long period of disuse. Clearly, Lady Pisani hadn't resided here long enough to fix up everything.

Ruthven stopped the horses, jumped down, and opened the door for his sister and the de Beaumonts. As they stepped down, Roland noted some run down stables at one end of the wall, a few collapsed building on the other side, and the central tower in the middle. The latter looked in far better shape, with huge ornate stairs leading to another set of heavy wooden doors.

Two stable hands approached to lead their horses and carriage aside. Bertilak nodded at them, and then led the others up the stairs. This time, there were no sentries, nor did Bertilak knock. He merely opened the door, and held it open, as though expected.

Ruthven walked in first, followed by the newlyweds, arm in arm, and finally Roland and Bertilak. They all stepped into a well lit parlor with several well cushioned sofas for them to rest on. There was a long rounded stairwell in the center of the room, and a fireplace that had a picture of a court lady hanging over it.

Roland scanned the picture, and saw that it depicted a tall, dark haired woman with olive skin and piercing black eyes. The woman's countenance was neither beautiful nor ugly, and could have been anywhere from a mature thirty to a well preserved sixty in age. Indeed, it was the face of someone about which one

could say very little for sure. Except for the eyes. Even in oil pigment, the eyes flashed with fare and a pride that would yield before no one. Or would fight any foolish attempt to try and

resist their owner’s wishes.

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The door slammed shut, jolting Roland out of future contemplation. Bertilak walked up, and pointed to the sofas around the fireplace.

> “Please, make yourselves comfortable,” he told them. “I will announce you to the lady.”

He made a slight courtly bow, and went up the stairs. Constance made the first move, plopping down on the couch with considerably less grace than she would have shown at a more formal occasion. Roger sat beside her, and put his arm around her. She smiled slightly, and let him kiss her cheek as Roland and Ruthven sat on the other side. A warm fire burned steadily in fireplace, and they all began to feel the fatigue of a long day’s end.

“Well, it’s not quite the evening we had planned,” Roger said after a few minutes. “But, after all, we must be good neighbors to all we meet.”

“Not much of that is seen these days,” Roland agreed.

“Well, I’ll be happy to get back on the road,” Constance replied. “This is an odd place, and I’m not sure if I like it or not.”

“I don’t know,” Ruthven said, looking around. “I think this place has a certain charm. Old, yes, but certainly not without elegance.”

“Very kind of you, sir,” a woman’s voice called out. They turned to the stairs to see Bertilak descending, followed by the woman in the picture. Dressed in a gown similar in cut to the Lady Constance’s, the woman moved with a grace that would have put several of the ladies at court to shame, along with a strength that would’ve rivaled most of the men. Abruptly, the four stood, and walked to the base of the stairs to meet their host.

“May I present Lady Viola Pisani”, Bertilak said. The men bowed while Constance gave a curtsey, avoiding the lady’s eyes for fear that she had heard her comment.

“Welcome Msr. de Beaumont, to my home,” Lady Pisani said, with a slight smile. “And thank you for your kindness to my dear friend, Bertilak. I have already ordered my servants to prepare a meal for you.”

“My thanks, lady, but please, don’t worry too much at our expense,” Roger answered, nodding politely.

“No trouble at all. In my homeland, to not give hospitality is one of the greatest of sins. Follow me. We will eat, and we will talk.”

She turned, and led them down another corridor past the stairs. After making several turns to the right and to the left, Lady Pisani brought them to a huge banquet hall. Roast turkey, freshly steamed vegetables, and newly poured wine awaited them. Servants had brought out golden plates and utensils, and other servants stood by to help them into their chairs and wait upon them.

“May I say a prayer, thanking God for our safety and for the food of our host?” Roland asked.

Lady Pisani’s cheek twitched slightly, but she nodded. Roland bowed his head and prayed. He didn’t close his eyes, and noted that neither the lady nor Bertilak bowed their heads.

As they began to eat, Roland asked them about it.

Bertilak answered for them both. “That there is a God in heaven is undeniable, sir monk.

However, we are more apt to follow the ways of the deists, who reject organized

religion and olden holy texts as the legends they are.”

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“You are a wicked one, Lord Bertilak,” Constance said, prompting chuckles from the green suited

man.

Roland saw nothing amusing in wickedness, and while not wanting to start an argument, couldn’t just let the gibe go unanswered.

“I fear you err, sir in calling the holy bible a legend,” he said. “It is not a fable born out of time like the epics of Homer, but an account that has been meticulously well preserved.”

“Truly?” Bertilak asked, still smiling, but with a slight edge to his voice.

“Truly. We have more complete manuscripts, written closer to the life of Christ, than any other holy book. The Iliad’s oldest copies are over a thousand years after Homer was supposed to live.
Furthermore, the disciples proved the truth of their accounts of Christ’s death and resurrection by dying for it. No one dies for a lie or legend.”

“What think you, sirs?” Bertilak asked, turning to the others as the servants

carved the turkey. “I would agree with my brother,” Roger said.

“I’m not sure,” Ruthven confessed. “The world around us seems to be changing so fast. God and country don’t seem to satisfy the peasants as they once did. What are we supposed to believe and to do?”

“Why, you should do as I,” Bertilak replied. “Eat, drink, and be merry, as the saying goes. Worry not about politics and religion. Take care of you and yours. Is it not so, Lady Pisani?”

“To be sure,” Pisani answered. She took a bite of her food. “I have seen men

and their ways for a long time, gentlemen. Do you know what all want? Power. From the kings, to the peasants, whether

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ruled by one, or few or many, whether a nation calls itself a monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy, it matters not. All want their own advancement. Including God."

"You don't feel God has our best interests in mind?" Roland asked.

"How can we know that when Popes act no differently than kings?" Lady Pisani asked. "They rule a small country in Italy. Some were good, some bad, all wanting that power. If they are God's children, then God is no different."

Roland stiffened somewhat. "Power wasn't why Christ came to Earth. He died for our sins. For reconciliation to God the Father, not conquest. The apostles sought to give that message, not gain power. It was only when Charlemagne's family gave the Church secular power, that they were blinded by it and lost their way. Yes, lust for power, not faith, is what works evil in this world. But it is not the way of good."

There was an uncomfortable silence as they ate. None wanted to argue further, and the others could see that neither Roland nor Pisani and Bertilak would succeed in changing the other's minds.

As they ate, and the servants poured more wine, Lady Pisani broke the tension by changing the subject.

"Pray, what do you think of my home?" she asked.

"A lovely spot, my lady," Ruthven said. "There is a sense of real history her, but it's close enough to Paris to still be in the present."

"Precisely why I picked it," Pisani confirmed. "Of course, it has not had any

nobility for a long time." She looked at Constance, who blushed slightly. "It must seem somewhat drab to a young Parisian."

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“Forgive me, my lady,” Constance said, realizing that Pisani had indeed heard her earlier. “I meant no disrespect.”

“Not at all. I still have much work to do.” She stood and clapped her hands twice. “But not tonight.”

More servants came in the room, bringing their luggage.

“I have taken the liberty of preparing rooms for you to stay the night,” Pisani explained. “The sun has set, and I won’t hear of you travelling the road in the dark. If you will be so good as to follow these servants, they will show you to your rooms. I must ask, however, that you stay there until the morning. Many parts of the castle are still in disrepair, and I would be embarrassed by them at this point.”

They stood, and the servants cleared the dishes. All had eaten well except Bertilak, who had

eaten nothing. Roger bowed again to the lady. “I thank you for a pleasant meal, and a warm welcome, lady,” he said.

“And I, you, for your company and conversation. We will talk more in the morning, I’m sure.

Good night.”

III

An hour later, Roger was reclining in a comfortable bed, watching Constance getting ready to retire. She had shed her wig and fancier skirts by changing them for a white evening gown. Looking in a mirror, she brushed her brown hair out of the tangles it tended to get in under the court finery.

Looking around the room, Roger judged it to be simple but adequate. A small boudoir occupied an alcove for a woman's fineries, and a closed presently held his clothes. The bed sheets were warm and clean, and a nightstand next to his held a candelabrum, which was the only source of light.

"Tell me, Roger, does your brother always argue with his hosts at dinner?" Constance asked. "I don't wish to be rude, but I would never have to boldness to do so. Besides, Bertilak does have his
charms, if you overlook his vices."

"I suppose that is where my brother is at his bravest," Roger answered. "He loves learning and discussing theology, and won't ignore a challenge. He meant no rudeness, and remember, my love, we are country people, not courtiers."

"Of course. And I don't disagree with him, but," she put down the brush and examined each side of her face. "I've always believed we show our faith by our kindness and courtesy to others. Why speak, why argue, when a touch or an open ear can be your gospel?"

"You are brave where he is not, and he is where you are not. It's why people are different, I suppose. I would try to do both, not one or the other."

She stood before him, looking lovely in the candlelight. Roger smiled tenderly at her, and pushed aside the bed cover. "Here we are," he said, forgetting abstract theology. "Husband and wife. Together forever."

Constance turned very red. She trembled slightly. "Yes," she

managed. "Are you happy, my dear? I promise everything

for you, all I have."

She nodded, and took a hesitant step forward. Roger's smile faded, replace with a look of concern. "My dear, you're afraid."

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“I’m sorry. It’s just…so much today… and I don’t know…” she trailed off, and looked at him with mingled love, nervousness, and confusion.

He stood, and hugged her. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. I love you. I would never hurt you or allow anyone else to, either.”

“I know, but…” she trailed off.

Roger looked down for a moment. “Listen. We have our entire lives ahead of us. Why don’t I just hold you tonight? We will rest, and face the next day together?”

She looked up at him. “Really?” she asked, thinking that while a kind man, her husband was, of course, still a man.

“Really,” he assured her, leading her to the bed. They lay down together, and Roger kissed her

head.

“Tomorrow, we will head to Beaumont,” he told her. “You will enjoy it there. The abbey, where the monks cared for Roland and I, still stands. The brothers grow gardens and vineyards for the surrounding towns. Like you, dear, they use their hands more than their mouths for God. But they can also give sermons that make you feel as though you could reach out and God would reach back for you.”

She stopped trembling, and Roger stroked her hair. “Roland took the vows of the order, but I wanted to live outside the abbey. The countryside is green and good in the summer. I bought a vineyard, and all of the vines grow well. I help the others, our servants, harvest. Then, when the sun sets and the grapes have been pressed, you can see the stars on a clear night. And when it rains, you can sit in the parlor, and listen. Or, on days where the weather is well and there is no work to be done, we can take our carriage to the lake, and take our lunch there. And

people welcome you there. There’s

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no scheming courtesans, or angry, starving poor. People live, and love, and never have too much or too little."

Her fear had subsided now. She leaned on him, feeling her breath deepen, and sleep begin to overtake her. "Thank you," she said.

He kissed her one last time. "We have a lifetime together, dear. I will be here. Always."

A knock on the door stunned Ruthven out of a light doze. Blinking sleep out of his eyes, he stood and answered. Outside was one of the porters who had carried his luggage earlier. The man bowed politely, and waited to be addressed.

"Yes?" Ruthven asked.

"The lady Pisani would like a private word with you, sir," the man told him. "Would you be so kind as to follow me to the parlor?"

"Oh," Ruthven stammered, confused. Why was he being summoned at this hour? It had to be nearly midnight. Briefly, he wondered if he were being summoned to a liaison, but immediately discarded the thought. His gut told him that the lady had lost such passions long ago.

"Is something the matter?" he asked the porter.

"Nothing is wrong. The lady merely wishes to continue dinner's conversation. Without the others."

The porters eyes narrowed somewhat, and he put just the slightest bit of

emphasis on the last three words. Ruthven shuffled uncertainly, and nodded.

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“Let me get dressed,” he said.

A few minutes later, the porter led them back into the parlor, where the fire still burned, despite the lateness of the hour. Lady Pisani sat on a couch, sipping more wine. She looked up upon hearing his footsteps, nodded, and pointed to the sofa on the other side. Ruthven sat down, and noted a glass of wine for him as well.

“Thank you for coming, lord Ruthven” Pisani said as he sat down. “I find I can’t sleep and would enjoy some company. Pray, tell me of the news in Paris.”

Ruthven chatted with her for some time. They spoke of happy things, like his sister’s courtship and wedding. They spoke of ill things, like the peasants lack of food, their growing discontent.

“Do you think it will end badly, my lady?” Ruthven asked. “I mean… the American colonies revolted. And won. Who’s to say it won’t be the last, but the first of such things?”

“Not the first, Ruthven. Men have ever answered disappointment with a clenched fist,” she replied. “Remember, men are driven by greed first, then pride, then fear. Is it not so? Look at history, if only in passing, and tell me it is not.”

“I… suppose I cannot,” Ruthven confessed.

She cocked her head to one side. “Still…as a member of the well-to-do, I could understand your unease. After all, in such an event, you would have far more to lose than to gain, I’d wager.”

Ruthven nodded. “I admit it, lady. I fear change.”

“Of course. Because, for you, change would surely be for the worse.”

Ruthven took a sip of his wine before continuing. “I mean… I could understand wanting enough to eat. Of course, I could.”

“But you don’t want anything taken from you or your loved

ones either.” “No.”

Lady Pisani finished her glass, and put it on the ground.

“My lord Ruthven, you are a child of the Enlightenment. You would approach a new idea with an open mind, would you not?”

“I suppose so, lady. But what do you mean?”

“I enjoy your company. And I would like to help you, if you would let me. What would you say to new skills that would banish your fears of being hurt or unable to control your own life?”

“I should like that very much, my lady. But

what…” “Watch,” Pisani whispered.

Ruthven followed her finger as she pointed to the glass on the floor. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, it began to shake, as though vibrations beneath the floor were trying to move it.

Then, it exploded, sending shards of glass towards Ruthven’s feet. The startled young man cried out, and leapt to his feet, dropping his own glass in the process.

“You? You?” he sputtered, looking wide eyed at the lady, still sitting calmly on her sofa. Pisani dropped her hand back to her side.

“I told you, did I not? There are skills few are brave enough to seek or cleaver enough to gain.”

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Instead of feeling more at ease, Ruthven felt fear. He looked at the lady, into her intense black eyes. Eyes that smoldered with a fire just beneath the surface. A fire that could burn just as it could forge, depending on their owner's desire.

"Are you a witch?" Ruthven asked quietly.

Pisani's lip twitched in what might have been the beginning of a sneer. "Witch hunts and witch trials are a thing of the Dark Ages. You, a modern man, are surely above such things, yes?"

Ruthven didn't immediately reply, so she answered for him. "Of course you are. Come, don't be a child, lord. Let us merely say, I know things. Things I am willing to show you, if you're brave enough."

"I…" Ruthven's head spun, filled with contradictorily thoughts. He had no idea how to answer. "Take a day to think about it," Pisani told him, standing.

"Only, don't tell the others. They wouldn't understand. Particularly not the monk; you saw how he was at dinner."

"But…my sister. I would want protection for her, too," he replied, finally saying something articulate.

"Ah, but she has a gentleman husband to care for her," she replied. She put a hand on his shoulder, and he flinched. But her grip, while strong, was warm and human, and seemed to smooth over the unnatural shattering of the glass.

"It is not selfish to want to protect yourself in these troubled times," she assured him. "Think carefully, and I will do my best to help you. In the meantime,

get some rest. Good night, lord Ruthven.”

She turned and walked away without another word. Then he stumbled back to his chamber, and collapsed on the bed.

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IV

The next morning, Lady Pisani summoned her guests to a breakfast in the dining room. Unlike the previous night, conversation was lighter, and with fewer words. Roland, for his part, had slept relatively well, as had Constance and Roger. Ruthven, however, looked haggard, with bloodshot eyes and disheveled hair. When questioned by his sister, however, he merely reported having stayed up too late.

“Forgive me, Msr. de Beaumont, but I wonder if we might stay another day?” he asked. “I don’t feel alert enough to drive the coach today.”

“My dear Jean, I had no idea you would take so ill to the country,” Roger replied. “I’ve found it rather refreshing here.”

“I assure you, it isn’t that,” Ruthven said. “Truth be told, I’m not ready to return to Paris just yet. It just doesn’t seem the place to be right now.”

“Well, if that’s what’s bothering you, you’re welcome to stay with us for a few days,” Roger answered. “Really, we shouldn’t impose on Lady Pisani anymore.”

“I assure you, sir, my house is your house,” Lady Pisani answered, finishing her bacon and eggs. “I have business with some of my people today, so we won’t be in each other’s ways. Lord Bertilak should be able to entertain you in the meantime.”

“Where is he, anyway?” Roger asked, looking around. “He hasn’t joined us yet.”

“Forgive me, gentlemen and ladies,” Bertilak’s voice called. They turned to see him coming in the open door. Roland noted that, not only was he still wearing the bandage around his head, but that he was walking with a strange, almost jerky

limp, as though all his joints had been frozen stiff.

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“I seem to have overslept,” he told them, with a small smile. “I also slept on my wrong side, it would seem. Hence my walk this morning. I must move around, to loosen up today.”

“Perhaps, lord, you would be so good as to entertain our guests?” Pisani asked. “Perhaps you might show them around my home? You know which places they may or may not wander.”

“Ah. Perhaps I could take them down to the dock?” Bertilak suggested. “That would be a wonderful way to spend the day, rowing along the river. And it would be just the exercise I need.”

“Very well. But remember, it’s close to the dungeons, which aren’t safe to go

through.” “Dungeons?” Constance asked.

“In disuse for centuries, I assure you, dear,” Pisani replied smoothly. “This castle belonged to a medieval noble family that has long since died out. Unfortunately, between that time and the time I
came to live here, the people of Mejnor neglected the buildings

and grounds.” “I can take them down the southern

stairwell,” Bertilak offered.

“That will do. Well, I must be off,” Pisani said. “Enjoy your time on the river.”

She bowed to them all, and left. Bertilak walked closer, and smiled at them all. Roland noted that the stiffness in his joints extended to his face as well. Furthermore, there was a very faint, but still noticeable, rank odor about the man that made Roland raise his eyebrows.

“Are you sure you feel like exercise today, lord?” he asked. “You did take a nasty blow to the head yesterday, and you missed breakfast.”

“I am well,” the nobleman answered. “Come, let us be off.”

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A few minutes later, they had walked down another flight of stairs to an alcove in the hill on which the castle stood. It was open to the riverbank, and a dock had been built there long ago. Moored to the dock were two large rowboats.

Roland looked at the other end of the alcove. An open doorway led into a dark room. As he looked, the monk felt a cool breeze coming from it. Somehow, it chilled his skin more than it should have.

"What is that?" he asked Bertilak, pointing to the opening.

"The cellar. And beyond, the former dungeon," he answered. Then he pointed to the boats.

"I can ride with lord Ruthven," Bertilak told them. "I haven't had much chance to catch up with him. You three can take the other boat. This part of the river is fairly calm, but let's not stray too far from the shore."

All were in agreement, and after boarding, Roland agreed to paddle so that Roger and Constance could sit together. The monk had tried to stay active and sharp as he aged, so had little trouble paddling out into the river.

As they passed from the alcove, and saw the sky overhead, the sun came out, warming them up.

Roland leaned back and breathed easily, then realized that he hadn't for nearly two days. As they passed into the middle of the river, Roland looked at the hill and castle resting upon it. Why, he wondered, did it give him a subtle, but uncomfortable and somehow familiar feeling of unease?

Granted, both Bertilak and Lady Pisani's views on life ran counter to his own. He had learned long ago, however, the folly and futility of trying to force anyone to believe what they didn't want to believe. He could only present his own case, and

pray others would allow themselves to be led to the Savior.

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A movement out of the corner of his eye disturbed his musings. He looked up, and gazed back at the dock and the lower levels of the castle, which burrowed into the mountain. He thought he saw a figure walking in front of the doorway to the cellar. He blinked, and the figure seemed to fade.

He glanced at Roger and Constance, who were murmuring to each other, heads together, and paying no attention to the shore. He was about to return to rowing the boat when he saw the figure again. It had the shape of a man, but was dark and featureless, like an oil slick.

Roland's jaw dropped and he felt rather than saw his knuckles whiten as he gripped the oars tightly. Suddenly, after three decades of trying to forget, he was once more the frightened child cowering in a Middle Eastern cave, while shadows sought to take his life. The same feeling of coldness, of sickness, was there, and he felt his throat go sore, as though he'd been screaming for hours.

The figure looked at him, having no face, but seeming to know it was being watched. It turned away, and went into the cellar. Roland, however, felt no relief.

Without really thinking, without really knowing why, he began to paddle back to the dock. The more logical thing would be to turn the other way, to keep paddling until the castle was far out of sight, and then to try and persuade his family to flee with him back home, if not out of the country altogether.

Roger and Constance looked up, dumbfounded. "Roland, what is it?"

Roger asked. He didn't answer, but only paddled faster than ever,

reaching the dock in record time. "Roland, what's the matter with

you?" Roger asked. "Roland? Roland!"

He had thrown down the oars, jumped onto the dock, and ran into the cellar.

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“The lady tells me she had been having some interesting conversations with you,” Bertilak told Ruthven.

“Interesting, yes,” the young man agreed. He looked up. “Look now, sir, you say you have known her for a long time?”

“Certainly.”

“And in that time, she never seemed to you, well, dangerous?”

Bertilak laughed. “Nay, lord. To be sure, some of her ways aren’t the ways of common people.

Still, she had only done that which is for my good. You can be assured that she will be good to you s well, if you allow it.”

“I want to believe. But, it’s all so strange. How can I be sure?”

“Meet her again. Tell her your worries and fears. And she will set them at ease.”

He leaned in closer. “In fact, if you would, the lady told me to tell you to come to her study tonight at midnight. It’s up at the top of the staircase, impossible to miss.”

“I will think about it,” Ruthven said.

Bertilak nodded, but before he could reply, he heard splashing from the other boat. Looking over their shoulders, they saw the other boat, steered by Roland, making for shore. Then the monk leapt out and ran into the cellar, ignoring his brother and sister-in-law.

“What is he doing?” Bertilak demanded. “I told him not to go there!”

Roland ran into the doorway. Inside was a large open area containing old wine barrels, still arranged fairly neatly, but covered in dust. Faint torches lit the doorway at the other end of the cellar. He looked around the grimy, forgotten bottles to see the figure walk through the far doorway. As it did so, the torches flickered and nearly went out.

Cold sweat appeared on Roland's brow, as he followed. What was the matter with him? Why

couldn't he seem to control his own body? He had to know for sure, had to see if the phenomenon was indeed that which he had feared for most of his life.

Beyond the cellar was a small room with two sets of bunk beds on either wall. Beyond that was another door with a rock of rusted swords. Clearly a former guard barracks, the dungeon must lie beyond.

Roland kept moving, and the hallway became flanked with old cells on either side. Why such a small castle needed so many cells, Roland couldn't say, and he had little time to think.

Shaking from cold and dread, Roland looked to his left when he reached the halls end. Oddly enough, he saw no evidence of damage. It looked perfectly sound. His fear temporarily mingled with confusion. Why had Lady Pisani told them not to go down there if the stairs were fine?

He heard a faint banging noise behind him. He turned, and saw another door. One that was closed. As he looked, he heard another tap, and realized that something was behind the door.

Leave, he thought. Every rational thought in his head was telling him to leave.

His body, however, didn't seem too concerned with the reason and rationality

that so characterized the present age. His feet stepped towards the door. Then they took another, and still another.

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Soon, Roland found himself standing before the door. Another tapping could be heard, followed by a low growl. Somehow, the growl didn't sound like a dog, or anything he had heard before.

Please, he thought. I want to go now. Move, turn away, do

something, just don't… His hand found itself on the doorknob. It

began to turn the door open…

A cold hand clasped on his shoulder. The nails of the hand had the skin pulling back from them, as if from death, and a rank smell greeted his nostrils.

He was spun around, and saw none other than

Bertilak. "You were warned to stay out of

here," he said sternly.

He led the dazed Roland back down the hall, and called out to the others. "It's all right! I found

him!"

They walked back into the relative sunlight of the dock. Off to the side, Roland could see Roger, Constance, and Ruthven all looking at them with concern.

"Roland! What happened?" his brother asked for them all.

"I…I don't know," he confessed. As he breathed the open air, he felt the fear and the notion

that he wasn't in control subside. However, it was being replaced by confusion and a slight vertigo, and Bertilak carefully led him up the stairs.

"I think," Bertilak told him as the others followed. "It would be best if you

were to lay down for the rest of the day.”

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V

A clock at the top of the stairs tolled the midnight hour as Ruthven approached. Turning to the left, he headed for a set of doors that he judged to be Lady Pisani's study, based on their size and splendor. He knocked on them uncertainly once he stood by them.

> Lady Pisani opened the door, looked upon him, and nodded. "You've come. Good."

"I'm sorry for Roland's actions earlier, lady," Ruthven began. "I pray you will not hold them against me."

Roland had been in his room since the incident in the cellar. Of course, his absence at dinner was noted by her, and when she inquired, they had been forced to confess what had happened. While she had kept her temper, the lady had clearly been displeased.

> "Don't worry about the monk," she assured him. "He doesn't matter. Please come in."

She stood aside, and Ruthven entered. Looking around, he saw a roughly circular room lined with rows of books. Many were quite old in appearance, and there were even a few dusty scrolls among them.

In the middle of the room, two chairs flanked a table on which were arranged six stone tablets. Ruthven approached the table, wondering what the curious objects were for. They were covered with wedge shaped markings that Ruthven assumed were letters of some kind, although he couldn't read the language.

Pisani walked to the far end of the room. On one side was a fireplace, and on the other were two stone sphinxes, with the heads of bearded men and the bodies

of lions. In the middle was a large

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window that stretched to the high ceiling, and opened to the countryside and village below. A bright full moon hung in the sky, casting its pale glow on all it touched.

“Is this why you chose this night, my lady?” he asked. “Because of the phase of the moon?” “No. The moon has no bearing on what we are about to do.”

She looked out at it, and for a moment, her face assumed an almost wistful expression. “You know, once men believed that it was a god. They saw it as the one which brought forth the cool night to counter the scorching days. To them, it brought both rest and safety, even providing a comforting light to ease their fears. They adored it, prayed to it, and sang to it in hopes that it would intervene in their lives.”

She shook her head, and the wistfulness became tinged with bitterness. “But it’s nothing more than a stone, a dead, pockmarked rock of no more value than those at the bottom of lakes. It just happened to be much larger.”

Ruthven didn’t know what to say at first, so the lady continued, still gazing at the sky.

“If only those poor fools had known. If only they realized that their beautiful worship services, their tender songs, their eloquent prayers were all for nothing. If only they had known a better way.”

“You almost speak as if you knew them personally, lady,”

Ruthven said at last. “Do I?”

She turned, and looked into his eyes. “If you are to learn and to grow, you must be willing to cast off your own preconceived ideas about the world. Do you think you can do that?”

“I think so.”

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“Good.”

She walked over to the fireplace, picked up a nearby fire starter, and lit some wood that had already been placed there. Then, she went back to the center of the room, and sat in one of the chairs, motioning for Ruthven to sit in the other.

Pisani held one hand over the tablets, closed her eyes, and began chanting softly in another language. Ruthven felt a chill enter the air, despite the warm night and the nearby fire. He looked form Pisani to the tablets, and his eyes widened.

In the space between the tablets, a black vapor began to materialize. Ruthven stared, frightened and dumbfounded as the strange vapor floated above their heads. It began to grow, and branch out in five directions, taking the vague outline of a human shadow.

Pisani opened her eyes and looked at him, silently giving him permission to

speak. “What…what is this?” Ruthven asked quietly.

“A spirit. One of many beyond our world.” She eyed him, gauging his reactions. “Are you surprised? But even the church goers acknowledge worlds beyond ours, containing ghosts of humans, the spirits you call angels, and the one you call God.”

She gestured to the figure above them, and it floated to the ground, seemed to gain footing, and began to walk the parameter of the room.

“They war against one another,” Pisani continued, as Ruthven watched, fascinated. “And against us. Some demand our service. And some offer theirs.”

She pointed to the spirit again, and it approached. Ruthven felt a lump in his throat that he at first thought was more fear. But then, he noticed an inflammation in the throat. He felt his throat getting hot and his forehand getting dizzy. He coughed, and felt the phlegm accumulating in his lungs.

He looked imploringly at Pisani, who gestured one more time. The spirit vanished, and he gradually felt his throat and lungs clear. In a few minutes, the sickness had left him as quickly as it had come.

"That is more than you can handle, I think," Pisani told him. "However, I think I can still help

you."

She pulled out a necklace from one of her pockets. The necklace looked to be made of opal and was carved in the shape of a crescent moon.

"This is an eye of Sin," she said, giving it to him. He took it, and turned it over in his hands while she kept speaking. "I have three of them. Once I had another, but it was lost."

"What does it do?" Ruthven asked.

"It can summon forth a spirit, who can enter you, giving you wisdom and power. It works with wearing the necklace and giving the proper incantation."

"My lady, do you speak of possession?"

"Not exactly. The spirit depends on the necklace to stay in this world. It can't force itself on you. It can only enter a living person freely. Or a corpse before it gets too far gone."

She looked in Ruthven's face and saw his growing horror.

“Come, lord, is that really such cause for alarm?” She frowned. “Does not Christianity speak of the Holy Spirit entering believers?”

“I …I don’t think that that’s the same,” Ruthven said.

“No. God only says he won’t leave you nor forsake you,” she said, a touch of scorn in her voice. “To see you through. What these spirits offer is a weapon. A fighting chance. Are you still afraid of our own countrymen, and what they will do when their hunger becomes unbearable at last? Be brave, Jean Ruthven. Take the help offered you.”

Ruthven hesitated, turning the necklace over and over in his hands. Then he nodded, and slowly put the necklace over his head.

Pisani led him through the words he needed to say. When he was done, the fire went out.

VI

Roland awoke the next morning stiff in body and troubled in mind. Although only nominally rested, he soon sat up, fully alert as he recalled the events that had led up to this moment. The cellar, the sights and feelings there, suggested to him one thing and one thing alone.

Their family’s ancient enemies had found them. Lady Pisani must be none other than the necromancer, Inana. And that meant she wanted both the seventh tablet and their lives.

He quickly dressed, and looked over at his few other belongings. Briefly, he considered packing, but there was nothing worth keeping that outweighed their lives. One thought kept going through his brain. Get out. As all costs, they had to

get out, and…

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What? He thought. Run away again? To where? Britain? America? Even the furthest European colonies in the new world or the Far East seemed to offer only temporary refuge from the necromancer. In the end, she would find their family. She always did.

But what else can I do? He thought. Fight? Against demons and whatever other dark forces she commanded? The same forces killed his father, a far stronger man than he. What chance did he really have?

I'm scared, Roland thought, as he knelt down on the ground. God help me, I'm scared.

He began to pray in silence for strength. Would God help him now? To be sure, He could, but would He? Did not the Almighty restrain Himself often so that human free will and nature could take their courses? When He did intervene, Roland knew, it took forms completely unexpected. He could only hope and pray for unexpected help now.

Still frightened, but somewhat more clearheaded, he stood and left the room. He walked across the hall, and knocked on the door opposite his own.

"Yes?" he heard his brother's voice call.

"Roger, are you and Constance dressed?" Roland asked.

The door opened slightly, and Roger peered out in surprise and relief. "Roland, thank goodness.

When did you finally awaken?"

"A few minutes ago. Hurry, get

dressed." "Are you all right?"

“No. And I need your help. Please.”

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Roger's brow furrowed, but he nodded and shut the door. A few moments later, Roger and his bride emerged from their room, and looked at the monk with concern.

"How are you feeling?" Roger asked.

"Roger. You aren't going to believe me," Roland began, making an effort to stay calm. "Can you believe what I'm about to say?"

"Go on. What is this all about?"

"The other day, when I ran into the cellar, I saw a shadow of a man. A black featureless shadow that moved like a man, despite having no body. What's more, I felt a pull on my mind, one that made me follow the shadow, although I didn't want to."

Roland took a breath, looked into his brother's eyes, and lowered his voice. "Only once have I felt something even remotely like it."

He glanced at Constance, whose own gaze asked a thousand questions. Although she knew that they were orphans whose family had originally come from the east, she knew nothing of the specifics.

Roland and Roger knew that they would eventually have to tell her of the tablet and their family's task, but had hoped to postpone it until she had children, and they were grown. Now, it would seem that she would have to begin learning.

"The night father died, the night Amnon came with the Eye of Sin. What I felt then, the evil, the danger. All that I felt again in the cellar of this house."

Roger stiffened, and Constance instinctively took hold of his arm. "Are you sure?" he whispered. "How can you know?"

“I just do. I feel it. We have to leave. Let us find Jean and go immediately.”

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“I’m here. What’s this talk of leaving?”

Ruthven emerged form his own room, and looked at them with dazed, glazed over eyes, as though he hadn’t slept well again.

“Yes, what is all this talk?” Constance agreed. “Roger, you never really mentioned your father. Are you telling me he was murdered? That Lady Pisani had something to do with it? But that makes no sense.”

“Please lady, we must leave at once,” Roland pressed. “As quietly as we can.”

“As your wife, I have a right to know, Roger,” she replied, frowning at both of them.

Roger took her by the arm, and turned her towards the hall’s end. Roland felt slight relief; his brother did trust him after all.

“Yes, love. Yes you do,” Roger agreed. “But not until we are on the road.”

They walked past Ruthven, who looked in their direction before following, albeit at a very slow pace. Roland brought up the rear, slightly irritated at Ruthven for his pace, but relieved that they were moving.

“But Roger, we aren’t even packed,” Constance protested as they went out into the main parlor. “Do you mean to just leave all our belongings here?”

“Things can be replaced, Constance,” Roger answered as he led them to the main door. “People cannot.”

Ruthven mumbled something under his breath. Roland, thinking that the young man had something to add to the conversation, was about to ask him to speak up when a figure emerged from the shadows. They all froze in their tracks. There stood Bertilak, blocking the way.

Roland gaped at the noblemen, shocked at how his appearance had deteriorated over the last day. His skin had taken on a slight greenish tint, his gums were beginning to recede from his teeth like his finger's skin had from the nails, and his body odor had gotten even worse. Evidently, he still wasn't eating as he hadn't come from the dining room.

He cocked his head to the side, as though listening. Ruthven had finished his mumbling, and Bertilak nodded and smiled politely.

"But what is this, my friends?" he asked. "Do you mean to depart without taking a proper leave of the lady?"

"Indeed, lords, I had a breakfast prepared for you already," Lady Pisani's voice called.

They turned to see the lady emerging from the dining area, her expression one of mingled surprise and displeasure.

"Are these the manners befitting a gentleman?" she asked. "Stealing away in secret, as though you were escaped prisoners? And this when you have been well treated while here? A most ill done act, lord."

She approached, and Roger put an arm around Constance, who looked embarrassed, but had enough grace and poise not to argue with or chastise her husband in public.

Trembling, Roland stood in front of the group to speak for them.

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“I’m afraid, my lady, while grateful for your hospitality, your house had a bad effect on us,” he said. “Rather than risk insulting your ladyship, we thought it best to leave discreetly.”

“Truly? And why would you do that?” Pisani asked.

Roland’s eyes looked around the room before returning to the lady’s hard stare. Bertilak still hung near the door, but seemed relaxed, not tensing up for any kind of fight. He could see on one else nearby. Furthermore, he did see the morning sun out the windows, and because he unconsciously held to the superstition that evil wasn’t nearly as powerful during the day, he got a little bolder.

“In the lower levels, lady, I found myself reminded of caves. I have been ever ill at ease around caves or anything that calls them to mind, because my father was murdered in one.”

Constance gasped, just loud enough to be heard, and looked at her husband. He grimly nodded his confirmation. Roland continued.

“My brother and I lived in the northern territory of the Ottomans as children. We were simple shepherds in the mountains until a thief came in the night to steal our only valuable. An ancient and much sought after artifact. Our father died so we could escape and eventually make our way to Europe. Needless to say, we have no wish to have any reminders of this time.”

Lady Pisani, to his great surprise, actually softened her expression somewhat. “I am sorry for your loss. I truly am.”

She walked over to a window, and gazed towards the east. “Indeed, it is terrible to lose all. I still don’t know what this has to do with my house, though.”

Roland paused. This was far from the reaction he had expected. Doubt crept into his head.

Was he wrong about her? Had he simply had a delusion in the cells? But no, it had been too real for him

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to deny his own senses. Was the castle haunted by something else then, something that really had nothing to do with his family's legacy? Could Lady Viola Pisani be, in fact, no more than what she claimed to be?

There was only one way to find out. Roland took a breath

and spoke again. "I think you do know. Inana."

The lady's back stiffened, and for a very brief moment, her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

Then, she quickly managed her emotions, and turned slowly around, her face expressionless, but her eyes blazing.

Any doubts Roland had had were now forever

banished. "What did you call me?" she asked

in a low voice.

"Inana. The necromancer, the immortal," Roland continued. "One who would unleash demons on the world but for the actions of my family."

She clapped her hands once, a scowl on her face, and a tremble of rage shivering up her spine.

At the sound, two porters came out, and bowed before their mistress.

"I will not be insulted in my own house," she told them. "If you wish to leave, I will prepare your coach. Your belongings I will send later. Go on your way, then."

She picked up her skirts, walked up the stairway, and turned a corner upstairs. A minute later, they heard a door slam, leaving only an awkward silence.

The porters silently left through the front door, and Bertilak stood aside to let them ready the coach. He shuffled his feet sheepishly.

“It would be best if we all go,” he said.

He led them out. Ruthven still appeared listlessness while Constance looked at Roger and Roland with mingled embarrassment, anger, and confusion. Never had she been part of such a scene. Silently, she was hoping that none of the rest of high society would hear of this. Still, she once again showed the good breeding that kept her from saying anything that would make the situation any worse.

For their part, the brothers looked at each other questioningly. Roland had been so sure, yet the lady, rather than either denying it or fighting, had simply turned them out. Was there, after all, any chance that they were wrong, and had in fact offended a regular noblewoman?

They stood in the courtyard while the porters retrieved their carriage and two horses. All looked to be in order, and the morning was clear and warm. The porters bowed to Ruthven, and handed him the horse reigns. Then they went back inside without comment.

Ruthven climbed up to the rider’s seat while Bertilak opened the side door to help Constance and the others climb in the carriage. Once secure, Ruthven cracked his whip, and the horses pulled the carriage forward. The gatekeepers held the door as the carriage departed the castle, and made for the village of Mejnor.

They rode in silence for nearly an hour. Roland kept glancing out the window to the road for two reasons. For one, he kept expecting to see someone, or something chasing them, for he still couldn’t believe that they were now on their way home.

For another, he was seated next to Bertilak, and the man’s odor was becoming unbearable. It now wasn’t even an unclean smell. He smelled of rotting flesh, and his greenish skin made Roland think

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the cavalier had fallen very ill. He wondered if he'd be well enough to make it back to either Beaumont or Paris.

Constance, for her part, had said nothing, but had only scowled at Roland, feeling that the monk had made fools of them all. Roger had tried to start a conversation, but she had only shaken her head, and pushed away his hand when he tried to put his arm around her. They all dreaded the attempts at explanation that would surely follow their return home.

Bertilak looked out the window, then and Ruthven looked down, meeting the other's eyes. The other passengers couldn't see, but Ruthven nodded, and directed his attention back to the road, as though searching for something.

Soon, he saw a large rock at the side of the road. Off the road was a small, abandoned tower shaped building that looked as if it may once have been a soldier's outpost. Ruthven sped up just slightly, not wishing to arouse the suspicions of his passengers, and then deliberately struck the rock with one of the carriage's wheels.

The carriage jolted violently, bounced up, and slammed back down on the ground, breaking the wheel. The four inside cried out as the horses attempted to try and keep dragging the broken carriage until Ruthven pulled on the reigns and slowed them to a stop.

Roger poked his head out of his window. "What happened?" he asked, gasping for air.

Ruthven jumped down. "I hit a rock," he said. "I'm sorry, but the wheel's completely ruined."

They all got out of the coach and looked around. Except for the abandoned

outpost, there was nothing on the road, and no one else to be seen.

They all walked over to the destroyed wheel to have a look.

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“It would seem we are on a cursed road,” Bertilak said, dryly. First my accident, and now this.” “Please sir, no jokes of that kind,” Constance replied, giving Roland a look.

“Of course not, lady. Forgive me,” Bertilak said.

Roger looked at the outpost. “Maybe we could find something to patch up the wheel there,” he said. “Roland, Bertilak, could you help me? Constance, you and Jean stay here in case someone comes by.”

They all agreed, and the men walked around to the opening of the outpost. Inside were smashed tables, and beds, a rusty rack of swords, and a thick layer of dust. Roger grimaced, but began to poke around the debris in hopes of finding any wood that could be used to repair their broken wheel.

The others followed suit, but none of them found anything useful. Bertilak moved stiffly, and put a hand to his head. Then, he began to undo the bandage around his forehead.

Sir, is something wrong?” Roger asked.

A bad situation, Roger de Beaumont,” Bertilak replied, removing the cloth. Roland and Roger cried out at what they saw.

An ugly, decaying wound could be seen under the bandage. A wound that should have killed any living man.

Bertilak smiled a sickly sort of smile, and then reached into his shirt. He pulled out a necklace he had been wearing, one identical to the one the assassin Amnon had had all those years ago.

“Yes, you were right,” Bertilak told them. “We are here, and we know you, just as you know us.”

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He advanced slowly, and the two backed away. Roger, thinking clearly, backed slowly towards the old weapons. Bertilak noticed, and moved in quickly, but Roger grabbed a sword, and swung it wildly, just as the enemy approached with his arms outstretched to grab him.

Roger hadn't been aiming, and the blade was old, but Roland cried out as he saw the head detach from its neck, just as the sword also snapped. Bertilak's body crumpled to the ground.

> "Let's get out of here," Roger said, preparing to run. Roland agreed, and they made for the door.

Then, the impossible happened.

As Roland stepped over the headless corpse, one of its hands reached out and grabbed Roland's ankle. The monk screamed as the headless body pulled him to the floor. Then it stood and, showing none of the weakness it has previously, picked Roland up and threw him into the old armory on the wall.

Roland felt excruciating pain as he impacted the wall. Then, he felt warm, wet and dizzy at the same time. Looking down, he saw that a rusty blade was protruding from the center of his chest.

Constance ran in, followed by Ruthven. She screamed at the sight of the dying monk, and the headless body, which was now circling Roger.

Ruthven then grabbed his sister from behind, pinning her arms with one hand, and clamping his other hand over her mouth and nose. She thrashed around in surprise and fear, for Ruthven seemed bent on suffocating her. This realization filled her with such panic that she didn't even have time to wonder why her brother was attacking her. She struggled and fought, but black spots began to appear in

front of her eyes, and her head began to swim.

Roger saw, and tried to run to help his wife, but the headless Bertilak blocked his way. Then, if possible, an even greater horror occurred.

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From the corner where Bertilak's head had rolled, Roger heard laughter.

The body took a few steps backward, and picked up the head by its hair. It lifted the head high, and husband and wife could see that its eyes were opening, and leering at them with perverse amusement.

The lack of oxygen to her brain, combined with the fight, caused Constance's head to lull forward as she lost consciousness.

"We are in command here," Bertilak's head told Roger. "Oh, you may strike down a body we possess, but for every one you do, another will be found to take its place. And that is only the beginning. Our necromancer will call forth other spirits that will cause such disease and suffering, that when Nergal himself come at last, they will beg for a release for their souls.

"All we need is that which you possess. Retrieve and return the seventh tablet, and you may go free with your woman. Refuse and she will die in such a manner as to haunt your conscience forever."

Carrying its head, Bertilak's body made for the door. Ruthven carried his limp sister out, and Bertilak raised his head one last time.

"Enjoy the quiet moment, Roger de Beaumont," it mocked. "It will be your last."

Then it staggered out the door. Roger watched, frozen, as Bertilak and Ruthven mounted the carriage horses that Ruthven must have unhitched. Then, with Ruthven carrying Constance, and Bertilak carrying his head, they rode away.

VII

Roland's vision darkened. He thought he saw Constance and Ruthven enter,

thought he saw

Bertilak’s corpse moving, but couldn’t trust his own senses. Then darkness overtook him. The last thing

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he knew was fear. The fear that followed him most of his life. The fear that Nergal or his followers would find them. That fear, in his last moment, had been realized after all.

Darkness overtook him, and all thought ceased. Yet, somehow, there was still a vague sense of self. He knew he was, but could not hold onto anything else. Roger, Constance, his friends, his enemies, even his own name, slipped away. He had a vague impression of cold, but no longer knew if cold was pleasant or painful.

For a long time, he drifted, perhaps for a minute, perhaps for an eternity of minutes. He vaguely became aware that it was no longer entirely black. Little pinpoints of light appeared, and he realized were planets and stars. A small blue one off to the side he barely recognized as his very own earth.

The view of this shrank, and Roland seemed to be pulled backwards. He saw more stars, and cluster of stars until he was so far away that he could see nothing more at all, and everything was black again for a time. Then light became visible in his peripheral vision.

He found himself staring at a small black object surrounded by light. The object seemed about the size of a nut, and was resting in the palm of a giant hand. He found himself able to turn and look behind him.

The hand belonged to an immense figure, like three images or projections moving into and out of one another, even as he/they held the star filled object in His hands. Roland realized that he stared upon God Himself, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and that the object in His hands was none other than the whole of creation. Creator and created, two distinct things, one infinitely small, one so large that nothing, not even void lay beyond it. One bound by time and space, one

unhindered by either.

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Roland was not even a particle to such a one, but the Almighty was aware of him, as he was aware of all. Roland felt naked, exposed, and afraid. But it was not the fear that came from malevolence, as the fear of Nergal was. This fear was born of the reverse, of goodness and power that could be never be matched by anything in creation.

Then, Roland felt himself flying back into creation. He saw it, as a ball with many layers, different worlds, and different universes besides his own. Some of great good, and unfallen, some dark beyond darkness. And he saw his own world, fallen, but being saved, at least in part, by the action at Golgotha.

Then, he lost all perception and thought once more.

When he was aware of himself once again, he saw that he was in a forest, but not the same one that he had been in before. He lay on the soft ground, and slowly sat up. The trees were bathed in warm light, although he could see no distinct sun in the sky.

With the thoughts of sun and trees came other thoughts. Little bits of knowledge reorganized and reoriented themselves one by one in his mind. As they did, he slowly remembered that his name was Roland de Beaumont. No, wait, his name was Jeremiah, no…

His brow furrowed as he tried to sort it all out. Soon he realized that both were names for what he usually referred to as 'I'. Roland was the name he used in…France. That was it. He worshipped the Lord and His Son there. How could he forget?

He stood up, began walking, and smiled vaguely. Yes, God was real, and all was well, and...

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Wait. He stopped in his tracks. No. All was not well. His home had fallen into sin and sorrow. For him, in particular, he and his brother and his brother's wife had been stalked by some who hated rather than loved God. He had been killed. But why?

He remembered other things now. Times before France. Times in the desert, hiding a slab of stone with his brother and father. He had been Jeremiah then, and…

"I died to save you," a familiar voice called out.

Roland turned, and saw a kind, ageing man emerge from the trees. The man was dressed in white and exuded goodness and peace. He dropped to one knee, but the person took him by the arm, and pulled him back up.

"No, I didn't mean that," the man replied. "Another died for your sins. I died to save your earthly life. Don't you remember? I am Gershom, your…"

"Father!" Roland cried out, his mind and memories clearing at last. He threw his arms around Gershom, and hugged him.

"I've missed, you, father," Roland said. "I've missed…I've missed not

being afraid." "You're not afraid now?" his father asked.

"No. How could I be? I'm beyond the necromancer now." Roland paused, and thought. "I died, didn't I? And this place, it isn't Earth, is it?"

"It is not. But even if it were, why should you be afraid?" Gershom asked gently. "You have seen the sum total of all. Loved by God, but infinitely smaller than He. What could Inana or Nergal do to put you beyond His reach?"

“Yes, father. It’s just that I couldn’t see it that way. I only saw that the tablet had to be hidden, but that Inana would use whatever powers she had to get it back.”

“As she ever will,” Gershom answered.

“Did we do our part well enough, father?” Roland asked.

“Your part is not yet over, son,” Gershom answered. “There is still the

matter of Inana.” “But, you mean that I must go back?” Roland asked.

“To slay her?”

“That is not for you to know,” Gershom answered. “Know only that she will fall in the end.”

Gershom took his arm, and led him down the path they had been standing on. They walked through the trees until the path ended. Standing there was another tree, the tallest and most beautiful he had ever seen. More alive looking than any plant he had ever seen on Earth, it stretched up so high, that the top was lost to clouds. Its fruit was golden in appearance, and resembled no fruits he had ever seen before. A few branches hung down, and on the end of one, Roland saw a wooden cross growing.

This Gershom picked off and handed to Roland. “You are being given help taken from the Tree of Life itself,” Gershom told him. “This cross has the power to exorcise the evil spirits Inana summons into the world. It also, when at its strongest, can break spirits.”

“I don’t understand,” Roland said, although he wasn’t sure he liked the sound of it.

“The greatest gift of God, apart from being itself and salvation for our misused free will is that of free will in the first place,” Gershom explained. “When the cross is sued in the greatest and most terrible way it can be, the free will and power is completely stripped from the spirit it’s used on. Such a one becomes nothing more than a remnant, only memory, anger, and regret. This remnant can no longer touch or influence the human world and sinks at last into the depths of hell.”

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Roland looked at the cross, and then held it out to his father. “Then it is too terrible for me to use. Even on Nergal himself.”

“It is terrible,” Gershom agreed, not taking the cross back. “To wield it, you must have faith, and you must have courage. You must go back, and run no more.”

“But father…”

“Remember who you are,” Gershom cut him off, sternly.

Roland took a deep breath, and tucked the cross in his pocket. “I am Roland de Beaumont,” he said. “Your son. Protector of the tablet.”

“Know who you are, my son,” Gershom repeated.

Roland bowed his head sheepishly, and uttered the name he had for years feared to claim as his own. “I am Jeremiah.”

The scene before him began to blur, and he heard Gershom say one more thing. “You are the voice in the wilderness. Prepare the way.”

Then, all went dark.

VIII

Roland slowly regained consciousness, and became aware of heaviness on his chest. This time, his thoughts cleared more quickly, and he remembered the chest wound he had received. He opened his eyes, and saw Roger leaning his head on his chest, crying.

“Brother,” Roland began softly.

Roger jumped back, as though shot, and covered his eyes. Roland looked down, and saw that while his clothes were still bloodstained, both the blade and the wound had vanished. He was, however, very sore, and groaned as he sat up.

Roger looked up, and wiped his eyes to make sure he wasn't dreaming. "Roland?" he asked timidly.

Roland looked at him, and nodded gravely.

"How can this be?" Roger asked, the anguish slowly giving way to wonder. He looked upon his brother, particularly where the fatal wound had just been.

"How...How long since..." Roland began.

Roger blinked. "A few moments. Roland, they took Constance. Jean's joined them too; I don't know why. They want the tablet."

"I know. But the tablet is still hidden in the abbey where I serve," Roland said.

Roger saw that his brother was trying to get to his feet. So he went over and helped him up. "What are we going to do?" Roger asked.

Roland steadied himself. His thoughts were still filled with the visions he had seen that day. Remembering one detail in particular, he reached into his pocket. Sure enough, a wooden cross was there.

He slowly drew it out, looking at it. It was a simple object, unadorned, and having no detail. Still, the act of merely holding the object gave him a confidence that he had never had before. Not

instant, but slow, subtle, making its way into his mind and heart until he could no more deny it than he could the physical object in his hand.

"We will fight," Roland said.

Constance slowly stirred back into consciousness. She kept her eyes closed, breathing deeply, trying to regain some of the air that had been stolen from her. She tried to remember what had happened, and where she was.

She heard voices coming from somewhere near her. Through her closed eyelids, she caught a hint of light. She kept her eyes shut though, still not wanting to fully awaken. She remembered her brother choking her. And she remembered…no. She wouldn't think of it. She wouldn't open her eyes. She would stay here, forever if need be. Just please, not…

A vicious slap hit her, nearly knocking her over. "Awake," she heard Lady Pisani's voice growl, devoid of any kindness or courtliness now. When she hesitated, she felt another slap, and opened her eyes, blinking back tears of pain.

Lady Pisani stood her, rage in her dark eyes. She had changed her fancy dress for a dark hooded robe, and had shed any other finery. Constance tried to look around, and realized that she was tied to a chair. Behind Pisani, Jean looked at her with an unreadable expression. A fire burned near an open window, showing Constance that it was near sundown.

"And this is what my enemy would take to bear his children?" Pisani asked scornfully. "Of course, I haven't seen any real men or women for centuries."

Constance looked at the cruel strong face in the hood, and remembered the monk's words from earlier. The ones that had so embarrassed her, although now she wished embarrassment was her only problem.

"It's true," she realized out loud. "Roland's words."

She thought Pisani would strike her again, but instead she nodded. "Inana was my original name," she told Constance. "I have had many since."

"How…how old are you?" Constance asked.

Inana paused. "I'm not entirely sure," she said. "Dates and calendars change, as does speech.

As for memories, well, I can remember back a few hundred years."

She looked over at a table, and Constance saw six stone tablets sitting there. "I remember my childhood, my family, my early life," she continued. She looked back over to her prisoner and frowned. "I remember my betrayers. Oh, yes, I see them in all their children, down through every generation.

The men always have the eyes of Atrahasis. The women all have the face of Ninshabar. My enemies taunt and judge me through the very looks of their children. Even if I didn't know Roger and Roland's history, I would have known them by their eyes."

Constance didn't answer, not understanding most of what was being said. Inana continued.

"But the years and the ages in between," she shook her head bitterly. "That I can hardly recall. It would seem that the mind can only hold so much after all. I have wandered far and seen much, but in the end, men never change, and I just go on living."

She shook her head, and looked out the window at the setting sun, literally one of millions she had seen. “Yes,” she whispered. “I tire of this world and its people.”

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She turned and smiled tightly at Constance. “You may wonder then, why I don’t end my life. Or give myself to your God? Because I will never give myself to anyone. And if I took my own life, there would be Nergal, waiting to eat my soul, yes, even I, who have helped him for so long.

“Again, for the other choice, I do remember the time when God became man. I saw Him from afar, this miracle worker whom some said was the Immanuel of Isaiah. I hid at the edge of a crowd, and I saw Him. He looked at me, looked into my eyes. He said nothing, but He knew me. And I Him.

“I saw that he was little different from the eater of souls. He wanted me as well, to bow and submit to him, to love, for that’s all love really is. Giving up the right to be for yourself alone.

“So I ran, Constance de Beaumont. I ran and hid in the mountains with my followers for over three hundred years. But He never came for me, and when I at last sent spies out, I found that He was gone. But, the very empire that had executed Him, now bowed down to Him. For love.”

She walked over to the table, and ran her hands over the tablets. “There is no freedom. Either you submit to one sprit, or another, or your own vices. The upstarts in the New World think they’ve gained freedom, but they’ll learn.”

She picked up something else on the table. Holding it up, Constance saw that it was a moon shaped medallion. She shuddered, remembering that Bertilak had been wearing one. She looked at her brother, who had been standing silent and stone faced the entire time, and saw that he too wore one.

“I have but one hope,” Inana said, walking over to Constance. “I will bring

Nergal and his fellows here. They will fight with your God for the scraps of this world. Then I and those who are truly mine will hide away, free at last. Then I can finally rest."

She held up the medallion. "But what to do with you?" she wondered aloud. "I have three of the eyes of Sin. Some of Nergal's use them for possession. But they can only enter a living body if the

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owner is willing. Otherwise, they will possess a dead one until the corpse decomposes too far. Bertilak wasn't willing. Your brother, here, was."

She held it up. "What about you?"

Constance trembled with fear. An uncomfortable pressure began to enter her head. Strange voices began to whisper into her ears. She closed her eyes tightly, and whispered, begging Father, Son, and Holy Spirit silently to help her.

"My lady, she is unwilling," she heard Jean speak.

Constance opened her eyes, and saw her brother finally arousing himself from his stupor. In his eyes, she saw conflicting things. On one hand, the brother she always knew and loved, but on the other hand, something dark and terrible that seemed to echo the whispers in her own head.

Ruthven stood, and walked over to Inana, who dropped the medallion to her side. The oppression Constance had been feeling dropped away, and she shook her head to try and clear it.

"My lady, please, let her alone if she isn't willing," Ruthven told Inana. "I wouldn't see her broken."

Inana seemed to consider, and then handed Ruthven the other Eye. "Perhaps," she said. "Put the Eye back."

Ruthven nodded his thanks, and tried to go. Before he reached the table, however, Inana had pulled out a knife from her robe, ran behind Ruthven, and swung the knife around his neck, slashing his throat.

Constance screamed, as Ruthven crumpled. For a moment, all was silent.

Then, to her horror, Ruthven’s body stood up, turned, and brought the medallion back over.

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As he approached, Constance stared in terror and revulsion at the sickly grin, the blood stained throat, and the eyes that now had no trace of her brother.

"Jean Ruthven is no longer here," the spirit inhabiting Ruthven's body said. It held the medallion high.

IX

Night had fallen as Roger and Roland slowly trudged back to Mejnor. They really had no plan, but knew that returning the tablet was out of the question. So they went on in hopes of finding some other way to stop Inana.

They made it to the outskirts of town. Already, the roads were all but empty. They remembered the fear they had seen among the townspeople when they first arrived, and now understood the reason for it.

Roger gripped Roland's arm, and pointed. Ahead of them, they saw a black shadow, one of Nergal's spirits walking along the road. Despite the blackness of night, the shadow could still clearly be seen, and the brothers stopped and tensed up.

The shadow, however, either didn't notice them or didn't care. It kept moving down the road. Then, it stopped at the door of a small hose, and floated through the bolted entrance.

Roland followed, and put his ear to the wall. He heard the sound of a child coughing and congested, sounding for all the world like a death rattle. Somewhere inside, a woman could be heard crying softly, and the low murmurings of the village

priest was administering the Last Rites.

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Roland remembered how Nergal had been known as a god of pestilence long ago. Indeed, his spirit helpers could steal away health and cause sickness. Never satisfied, they were, it seemed, about to claim another victim.

Roland pulled out his cross. Not if he could do anything about it. He held up his cross, whispered a quick prayer, and began chanting an exorcism in Latin.

The coughing stopped, but Roland and Roger felt themselves being pushed down by an unseen force. The shadow emerged from the door, silent, but menacing, and began to move towards them.

The front door opened, and Roland saw a peasant man and woman, along with the priest who had blessed them earlier, peer out. Their eyes widened as they saw the shadow, and saw the reason that their child had been ill.

Roland stood, and raised his cross again. He chanted louder, and more forcefully. Gaining confidence by the minute, he brandished the cross like a weapon, and finished the exorcism.

The spirit doubled over, as if in pain. Its form grew less dark, and harder to see. Then, it stood, and bolted away, towards the direction of the castle.

The priest opened the door, and stepped out. The woman put her hands to her mouth, and then ran back inside. A moment later, she came back out, leading a small child by the hand.

“A miracle,” she told her husband, as he stooped down and hugged his family.

The priest approached the de Beaumonts. “I am Father Zanone,” he said. “Pray, gentlemen, tell me who you are and where you come from. How is it you can drive away devils?”

“I am Brother Roland, a monk of the abbey in Beaumont,” Roland replied. He held up the cross. “My brother, Roger, and I are here to help.”

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“Yes, I recognize you now,” Father Zanone replied when he got closer, and squinted at their faces. “You were being taken to the house of silence. I marvel that you escaped, for none ever have before. Tell me, how did you manage it?”

Roland hesitated. He didn’t want to lie, particularly to another man of faith. But he also didn’t want to go into detail about the tablet or his family’s history with the necromancer.

“Come, brother, surely you can tell me,” Zanone persisted when he saw Roland’s hesitation. “Maybe I can help you.”

“We were on our way home from my brother’s wedding,” Roland began hesitantly. “A nobleman named Bertilak stopped us on the road and suffered us to take him to the castle on the hill. But we soon saw signs of evil there, like the spirit I just exorcised. We confronted the lady of the house, who turned us out. Then, Bertilak attacked us, and left us for dead.”

He hoped Zanone wouldn’t press them for more details, but the answer seemed to mostly satisfy him.

“You are fortunate. We have taken to calling that place the house of silence because neither it nor the strange people who lived around it have any dealings with us. They came about a year ago, and I tried to visit them, to see if they needed any spiritual guidance or other help.”

Father Zanone shook his head, and looked towards the hill. “I was angrily turned away. The lady I have never seen, nor was I allowed to enter her house. The few we have seen go in here didn’t come back, unless they happened to be one of the people who came with the lady.”

The priest looked again at Roland. “Then things grew worse. People began falling sick, and several have died. We’ve heard strange noises in the night, and found dogs and cattle the next day mauled by beasts. We have even...”Zanone leaned in close.

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“We have even seen some of our dead walking at night. Usually for a few days only, and then we find their corpses decomposing elsewhere. Such evil I can’t fight alone. I pray fervently to God, but I feel that my poor church is but a last redoubt against the coming darkness.”

“That would explain Bertilak,” Roger said. “He attacked us and…seemed to be dead.” He omitted the headlessness, feeling it was too horrible for these poor suffering people to hear. “The spirits must only be able to use a dead body to walk in until it becomes too far gone.”

“But sir, you said you had a bride?” Zanone asked.

Roger nodded. “We think she’s been taken back here.”

“That is bad. The house of silence will not spare her,” Zanone said sadly. “I am truly sorry for your loss.”

“I’ve not lost her,” Roger answered, perhaps a little loudly. “I will not leave her there; I would die first. Let that house try to remain silent if I ever get back in.”

“Evil is never the will of God,” Roland agreed. “Nor is despair. We are going to that house, and we’re not leaving until our business is done. If you really want to help us, maybe you can send some men with us.”

“What if we went to the people around the house?” The peasant father, who had been listening, spoke up. “I once saw a crack in the wall near the back. If we could draw their attention away, maybe
these men could sneak in and exorcise whatever is there.”

“That’s exactly what we need,” Roland said. He addressed Father Zanone again. “Father, do you believe we are from God?”

“Yes.”

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“Then help us end your suffering. Gather some men, get any weapon you can, and meet us back

here.”

He held up the cross again. “And trust in Him to protect you from the unnatural.”

The cross seemed to have the same effect on Father Zanone that Roland had experienced earlier. He stood up a little straighter, and spoke a little more forcefully.

“Yes,” he repeated.

X

Inana descended the staircase to the cellar, the one she had earlier told the de Beaumonts to avoid so that they’d find no clues to her true identity.

She scowled again as she thought of her enemies. She supposed that she shouldn’t have expected them to just fetch the tablet and meekly return. A spirit had flown in, and told her that they were back in Mejnor now.

But the sprit then fled back into Nergal’s domain, informing her that the de Beaumonts had somehow obtained something to exorcise them. Inana’s brow furrowed as she pondered this new development. It meant that her ability to induce possessions and sickness had been compromised.

She stepped before the sealed door by the dungeon, and listened to the growls and snarls behind it. Fortunately for her, she had other ways to fight back. Her human followers would attack any intruders that dared come up her hill. And if that wasn’t enough…

She opened the door, and waited. Soon, several shapes staggered out. They came into the light, and she could see that they were about three feet tall and completely covered in matted hair. Their arms and legs were bent out of proportion and had sharp, yellowing nails. But the most fearsome

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aspect of her beasts, her prowlers, was the fact that they had no head. Where the base of the neck should've been, was a large mouth filled with razor sharp fangs.

Inana pointed up the staircase, and the prowlers began to ascend. Although they appeared clunky and uncertain in their steps, Inana knew that they would move with surprising speed when provoked. And, of course, there were no surprises that came from the beasts' ferocity.

Under the cover of darkness, Roland and Roger snuck up the far side of the hill. After leaving Father Zanone, they had made their way around Mejnor and made sure that they were well beyond the familiar path and the smaller village that had Inana's followers.

Roland looked back, and saw a group of Mejnor's peasants, led by Father Zanone, walking up the path. Several carried torches to light the way, and in the torchlight they could see that a few of the village had muskets. A farmer or two had a pitchfork, and a few others carried clubs.

"They are coming through," Roger said, thankful that there was no way the brave men wouldn't be spotted. All the better to sneak into the house of silence, while attention would be directed outward.

Shouts could be heard from Inana's followers, and soon they saw another group coming forth on the path to meet the villagers. Some of Inana's men demanded an explanation, and Roland could Father Zanone arguing with them. He couldn't hear what was going on, but could see the argument becoming heated.

Roger put his hand on his brother's shoulder, and they turned to keep climbing the hill. The people of Mejnor had found their courage because of them. Now they had to keep their part of the bargain.

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They reached the castle walls, and began to look for the crack. As they rounded, a shot rang out from the crowd below. Roland quickly turned, and saw a smoking musket, and one of Inana's men dead. Shouting could be heard on both sides, and they could see Inana's followers pulling out and brandishing swords and daggers. Soon, an all-out brawl began.

Roland turned, and rounded the corner. Finally, he and Roger saw a crack that one person at a time could barely squeeze through. They did, and found themselves in the east part of the courtyard, near the fallen down buildings. They could see two guards at the main gate, but their attention had been attracted by the crowd below. Roland looked, and saw that the stairs up to the house entrance had no one watching. He and his brother took a quiet step forward.

Suddenly, the doors to the house flew open, and several shapes emerged. Roland couldn't see them clearly in the moonlight, but they appeared oddly short and stunted. Still, he got a sense of evil and danger from the shapes, as they filed down the stairs, and proceeded across the courtyard to the gate.

Roland and Roger ducked back into the shadows, as the guards turned around, saw the figures, and opened the gate door to let them out. They waited several tense minutes until the last one had filed out, and the guards returned to their posts. Then they looked back at the house entrance. To their relief, they saw that whatever the things had been, they had left the door open in their wake.

With an eye on the guards to make sure they didn't turn around, the brothers crept across the courtyard to the door. Then they quietly went up the stairs, entered, shut the door behind them, and looked around.

There was no fire in the parlor, and no one to be seen. The brothers looked at

each other

warily, and Roland pulled out the cross. Although they didn’t know for sure where either Constance or

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Inana were, neither wanted to begin their search in the dungeon, where their enemy could more easily trap them. Furthermore, they remembered that they always saw Inana going up and down the main stairs, so Roland pointed at them. Roger nodded, having the same idea, and they walked up the flight of stairs.

They looked to the left and to the right. The halls were dark, but they thought they saw a faint light on up another flight of stairs to the right. They walked up the stairs to the third floor.

One of the rooms had an open door with a light on. Other rooms lined the hall, but their doors were closed. Yet another flight of steps led to the final floor before the roof, the small floor in the back tower.

They walked past the door and looked in. Roger jumped, as though shocked when he saw a bed on which lay Constance. Although she seemed unharmed from this distance, her eyes were closed and she seemed to be breathing heavily.

Roger rushed in, but Roland hung back, still gripping the cross. Something didn't seem right. His brother knelt by the bed, and gently shook her, calling her name. She stirred, dazed, and still not opening her eyes. Roger kissed her.

> Then, she threw her arms around him, and gripped him tightly as though trying to crush him.

Roger tried to pull away, but she held on tight, smothering him with her face and hands. Roland held up the cross, and brandished it at her and she released his brother.

He saw that it wasn't Constance at all, for when the figure opened its eyes, he could see that they were solid black. Oppressively, completely black. The woman figure backed away from Roger just as he freed himself from her embrace,

and screamed a shrill inhuman scream.

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Roland held up the cross again and the figures mouth clamped shut, but she still glared at them with cold hate. However, she still didn't make another move for them, and they shut the door and ran for the stairs. They needed to get to Inana as quickly as possible, now that she'll know they were here.

Once up the final stairs, they were in a little room, which had a ladder leading to the top of the roof. However, on either side were two oblong stone boxes that resembled sarcophagi. Suspecting another trap, the brothers proceeded with caution.

Sure enough, as they approached, two more figures sat up, and then stood from the boxes.

Roland saw Bertilak, or rather the body of Bertilak possessed by whatever spirit desecrated it by inhabiting it. While it had rotted further, the head had been somehow reattached.

Then, they saw that the other was Jean Ruthven. No, not Ruthven, his throat had been slashed with a fatal wound, and he was walking stiffly. Clearly the same fate had befallen their poor, foolish friend, and they now stood before two evil spirits in human skin.

"You?" Bertilak demanded, his sickly eyes widening in shock. "But how?"

Roland held up the cross, and the two skin walkers jumped out of their boxes. The four men, two living, and tow dead, began to circle each other warily.

"You will use him no longer," Roland told Bertilak. He brandished the cross, and recited the ritual of exorcism. The figure screamed, and then was hurled back. As it fell, the Eye around his neck exploded and crumbled into dust. Something like tar oozed from its eyes, nose, and mouth, congealed into a sprit, and then bolted

away. Bertilak’s now empty and harmless corpse fell down in a heap.

Ruthven hissed, and also ran down the hall before Roland could do anything.

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“Never mind him,” Roger said, putting a hand and foot on the ladder. “Inana must be up here.

Why else guard it?”

They ascended the ladder, and pushed the door to the side to get on the roof. As they stood, the moon and stars greeted them above, and the smell of smoke and blood wafted up form below.

Roland went over to the edge of the flat roof, and saw the riot below. Several men on both sides lay dead, and the remaining kept fighting. But the most fearsome sight was the hairy, headless shapes moving through the ranks of Mejnor’s villagers. Roland could see that they only had mouths instead of heads, and were trying to bite and maul the villagers. Several villagers lay strewn about the beasts, but the farmers swung their pitchforks to fend off the prowlers. When they were fortunate enough to catch one with the barbed end of their instruments, the prowlers cried out, and fell over. Furthermore, when it died it dissolved into a mass of hair and putrid smelling liquid, as though the world itself would not suffer them to remain once the sorcery that gave them life fled.

“Roland!” Roger cried out, pointing. Roland whirled around, and saw Inana standing on the edge of the roof. Constance lay on the ground at her feet, another Eye of Sin around her neck.

However, Constance seemed neither dead nor possessed. Unknown to either of them, she had resisted and had fallen into a coma. Inana hadn’t initially killed her, hoping to use her as bait. Now, however, the point had become moot and the necromancer had drawn a knife from her own robes.

“You were fools to try your hands against mine,” Inana growled at them. “I, who have survived so long, I who have killed more than a few of your number.”

She stood over Constance, and held the knife up, ensuring that they got a good look. “Leave now! Bring me what I want, and I’ll let her go free. Refuse and I cut her throat. Then whatever spirit inhabits her body will deal with you.”

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Roland held up the cross, and tensed up, feeling that this moment would decide all. Inana's lip twisted into a sneer. "I don't fear your Savior!"

She advanced on them, but Roland began to chant in Latin. Inana was a living being, possessed only of her own spirit, so he knew he couldn't exorcise her. However, he remembered Gershom's words to him, how the cross could also take away from a living spirit, reducing it to a shell. A terrible thing to be sure, but then, wasn't the being he faced terrible?

Inana stiffened, as though caught into an invisible barrier. She dropped the knife, and her eyes widened.

"What is this?" she demanded.

Roland didn't answer, but kept chanting. He felt the Holy Spirit enter, and fill him, giving him strength, wisdom, and courage.

The power of the cross latched onto Inana's mind, and she dropped to her knees, holding her head. Roger ran past her to his fallen bride. He reached down, pulled the Eye from her neck and dashed it on the ground. Then he crushed the pieces under his foot, and knelt down before the woman he loved.

"Constance," he whispered in her ear, and held her tenderly.

Roland, meanwhile, felt the thoughts and memories of Inana. He sensed her more recent knowledge. He saw the means by which Ereshkigal had enchanted the Eyes of Sin, and blasted the free will away from them. Inana would not forget, per se, but would not have the will to create more, or tell others about them.

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“Ahhh!!” Inana screamed, as though stabbed. She raked her fingers over her temples, as if trying to dig out something that had burrowed into her head.

Roland kept pulling will and power form the memories and personality of Inana. He learned the names of people she had killed, people she had used and wronged; the list kept going back, century after century. Some of them she herself had forgotten on the conscious level, but the unconscious mind did not. Their names and the crimes against them paraded like ghosts, demanding justice, demanding

that he slay this one before him, this evil, this…woman?

Roland paused as he sensed something else. He felt rage and pride, yet he also felt fear.

Emptiness. He saw one who had outlived her time and place, one who had been cut off from humanity by the fact that she had outlasted all she had once cared for.

She hadn’t always been what she was now. Once, she had had family, friends, and comrades who served her out of true loyalty, not fear. A brother and sister appeared in his memory, and he felt Inana’s forgotten affection for them. Once, she had even been loved by one of her warriors, and she remembered to this day, in her deepest, most private moments.

Her ambition and her frustration with those who would hinder her or hold her back had carried her down the path of dark arts, to Nergal. Here she had found power, but also fear. She saw all, from men, to angels and demons to God himself as enemies and rivals. She had lost her ability to trust or to love long ago, and what she was left with seemed very hollow indeed.

Yet, she could not walk away from Nergal. The imprint that had happened

when Nergal gave her power wouldn’t allow her. She could only try to fulfill his commands and then run, run forever…

“Ah! Stop! Enough!” she screamed, bringing Roland back to the world and the task at hand. He had taken enough of her will that many of her arts were now inaccessible to her. Still, she had vast

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knowledge and skill, and it would ultimately take a complete breaking of her spirit to eliminate her danger completely.

Nearby, Constance's eyelids fluttered, and opened. She looked up into Rogers's face; he smiled, and pushed one of the loose strands of her hair out of her eyes. She smiled back, and tried to sit up, but he gently restrained her until she saw what became of the necromancer.

Inana's screams died down to a whimper, and she drew herself into a ball, weak, drained, and defeated. Roland stood over her, wondering again what to do. He could break her now, leave her a shell of her former self. Or he could end her mortal life, cut her throat, avenge her thousands of victims and be free of her forever.

Yet, something held him back. Some corner of his mind felt what she felt, when her mind had been laid bare, and he had seen her for what she truly was. What no one, not even her closest followers, could ever have known.

Slowly, he lowered the cross. "No," he said quietly. Roger and Constance looked at him questioningly, clearly not expecting anything that resembled mercy. Inana tried to look up, and focus on him, but her vision swam in and out of focus.

"You've been beaten this night," Roland said slowly. "But what do either of us really have to show for it? For so long, your people and mine have fought. Yours have killed ours, and ours have killed yours. When will it end? With all of us dead?"

Roland lowered his cross and continued. "Is that the only way? To hide and strike, disappear and do battle again without ever having more? Without ever being able to join the larger world?"

He shook his head. “I’m tired of running. And so are you. So I propose a truce.”

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Inana, Constance, and Roger were all very silent, listening to every word. Roland held up the cross again, and the necromancer flinched.

“Allow me to seal off all the spells in your mind,” he said. “And I will let you keep your memories and your will. You will still be able to go, to pursue any path you wish, just not this one.”

He tucked the cross into his robes, and held out his hand. “Give me your tablets. We can destroy them all, and then you will be free of Nergal. We can go our own ways. We can live like normal people, live the way He, who told us to love our enemies, would have us live. Even if not, perhaps some way, somehow, you can be at peace. It could all end here. What say you?”

Inana took his hand, and unsteadily got to her feet. She stood before him, hanging her head, and not speaking for several moments.

“No,” Inana said at last. “It’s too late for that.”

Suddenly, all weakness and submission seemed to leave her. Her fist lashed out, and caught Roland in the chest, knocking him backwards and rendering him out of breath.

Quick as a striking snake, Inana bent down and picked up the knife. She tossed it easily form one hand to another, as one who knew war and weapons well. Her eyes blazed with fury and hate, and Roland realized now that there were those who sought no redemption.

“It's too late,” she growled, and advanced dangerously, like a wolf stalking its prey.

But this particular wolf had forgotten the others behind her. Constance pushed

Roger aside, stood, and her hands grabbed Inana from behind. She roared in surprise and anger, but while larger and stronger than the young noblewoman, Constance had the element of surprise. With all her might, she pulled Inana back, and released her in the direction of the wall.

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Although she failed to knock her over, Inana flailed backwards, hit the wall, and went over the side. They all heard a scream, followed by a loud splash as the necromancer hit the waters of the Seine. Roland staggered to his feet, and they all quickly hurried over to the edge. Of Inana, they saw no trace, although they could clearly see the water and the dock.

Roland squinted, and looked at the dock. To his surprise, he suddenly saw a figure running out of the cellar to the river. Looking again, he saw that it was the possessed Ruthven and that he had the other six tablets clasped in his arms and held to his chest.

> “Roland! The cross!” Roger said, pointing to the fleeing man. “Stop him! Get the tablets!”

Roland pulled out the cross, and hesitated. Was Jean Ruthven still in there? Was there any way he could be saved?

> Constance saw his hesitation. “Roland, he’s dead!” she told him, silencing his concern.

Roland quickly raised the cross and gave the incantation. The third and final Eye of Sin burst, Ruthven screamed, and they saw a dark spirit flee his body and vanish.

Now, Ruthven’s body was just another corpse, another victim of this night. But the momentum of running continued until the corpse fell into the river, tablets and all. The current pulled them under and they were gone.

Roland sighed, and lowered the cross. Putting it back into his pocket, he turned his gaze back over to the village where the people of Mejnor had finally killed all of the prowlers. That and the loss of their leader, witnessed by several on

the ground, caused Inana’s people to throw down their weapons and surrender. Father Zanone, still alive but bleeding, was exchanging tense words with the people about leaving Mejnor, never to return.

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Roland looked over at Constance and Roger. The former wept softly, while the latter put his arm around her for comfort. Then, she turned and embraced him. She herself did, where before she had simply allowed him to.

She looked into his eyes, and her husband saw love. Leaning in, Constance kissed Roger tenderly, through her tears, and clung to him, as though ensuring that that would prevent any further separation. Roland realized that after all, some things had been gained that night. He had found courage, Roger love, and Constance both.

Epilogue

Over a decade later, on a sunny afternoon, a carriage entered the town of Mejnor. Roland drove the horses this time, and looked around in wonder at how very little the small village had changed.

He was glad for that. Mere months after the battle with Inana, the event that Ruthven had dreaded had occurred. The Parisians had revolted against the king, and France had been thrown into chaos.

Roger and Constance had used their wealth and influence to flee with their families, Roland included, to Britain, where they had lived comfortably for several years. Now though, the country seemed a little more stable under a leader calling himself Napoleon Bonaparte, and they had risked a visit back to the house of silence.

Roland drove up the hills, and he could see that the houses that had been next to the castle had been torn down. He had asked someone in Mejnor about the

area, and had learned that the outsiders hadn’t been seen or heard from since they had left.

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Roland looked over his shoulder at the retreating village, and noted the small graveyard. Father Zanone was buried there, having died peacefully about two years ago. He had heard that the old priest had been a faithful minister, both through the night of horror and the years of revolution.

Ruthven's body had eventually been found and laid to rest there as well. Of the tablets, no trace had ever been discovered. Roland wondered whether they were truly lost and if Inana was truly dead. Or had she survived, and simply gone into hiding until she was ready to try for the seventh tablet again?

He rode through the open gate, and stopped in the courtyard. He jumped down, and opened the door. Roger emerged, older but happier, accompanied by Constance. Lady de Beaumont had lost her girlishness now, but had blossomed into the beauty of a stately, mature wife and mother. Their son, Jean, and daughter, Ruth, followed, as beautiful as their mother, but with their father's eyes.

They had returned to search the house of silence, to make sure that nothing of the necromancer's remained that could either cause harm, or that they could use. They slowly walked through every room, searching every corner, finding many abandoned odds and ends, but nothing of Inana's. Even the portrait had been taken from over the fireplace.

Finally, they stood on the roof, thinking. Roland no longer lived in fear, but also couldn't believe that Inana was gone for good until they saw her body. Since that was unlikely to be, they had all agreed that they must follow Gershom's pattern and pass the tablet, along with its story, down to the younger generation.

Roger nodded, and Roland sat down on the ground, facing young Jean and

Ruth, who sat in Constance’s lap.

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“Once, many thousands of years ago,” he began. “Our first mother, Ninshabar, and first father, Atrahasis, were the subjects of Queen Inana.”

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Pirates of

Lagoda I

Red at night, sailor’s delight. Red at morning, sailors take warning.

The red sunrise on the sea called to mind an old phrase Arvin Jaggers’ grandmother used to say.

She had grown up on the southern coast of England, the daughter of fishermen, and had always said that about the weather. She had remained convinced all throughout life that watching the sun in the sky was the best way of telling when storms would come.

If the dead could see the living, Jaggers hoped that she would not see him. For while he

remained at sea, he didn’t make his living as a simple fisherman. Rather, harder times had pushed him into raiding and privateering.

While some romanticized the life of a pirate, Jaggers simply saw it as the necessary step of maintaining his lavish lifestyle back home. He lived in a large gabled house overlooking the harbor of Port Dixon, in southern England. While his official occupation listed him as a merchant during royal tax time, his true activities were more or less an open secret among the people of the town.

He had found the answer to that problem easily enough. A few simple bribes were enough to cause the local authorities to look the other way. Gold covered a multitude of sins, and his life of raiding, alternated with revelry had become pretty routine.

Until this red morning.

He stood on the deck of his ship, and scanned the horizon with a pocket

telescope, hoping to find an easy mark. Slave ships from West Africa, and merchant vessels from the Mediterranean

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routinely rounded the coast of Europe, headed for England and France before either unloading their wares, or heading on for the Americas.

Sure enough, a galleon appeared on the horizon, bathed in the blood red light. Alone, and relatively small, it looked to be the perfect prospect.

He whistles shrilly, and his first mate, Gabriel Grubb, came up to his side. Weather-beaten, red faced, and tense as wire, Grubb's eyes never lost focus, nor did his hands ever stray far from the pistols at his side.

"The first catch of the day?" Grubb asked the captain.

Jaggers nodded, handed the glass to him, and pointed ahead. Grubb sighted the ship, and nodded.

"Get the men on deck," Jaggers ordered. He raised his voice. "Helmsman!" steer forty degrees starboard! Have the cannon prepared! Fire the usual warning shot, and have the men follow my lead."

The ship steered and knifed in the direction of their prey. As it did, his men piled out form below deck. A ragged and hard bitten lot, they brandished their guns and knives, eager to add to the red of the morning and the gold of their pockets.

The ship grew from a dot on the horizon to dominate their view in a matter of minutes. Jaggers' cannon blasted a round, sending sea water washing over their enemy's deck, warning all who would see that they would have to surrender or else.

The pirates pulled up to the merchant ship, and the men shouted. Led by their captain, they shouted and fired several shots in the deck. It had worked multiple times before, taking down sentries on deck before a counter attack could

be mounted.

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Only, there was something different this time. No one could be seen. As the ships pulled together, Jaggers looked form right to left, and down at the cannon ports. He suspected a trap, but surely no other crew would fire at their hull this close to their own ship.

He signaled, and planks were produced by his crewmen. They swung them over to the other ship, and soon scrambled to the enemy deck. Jaggers followed, and looked around. Still no one else appeared to challenge them. Indeed, it was eerily quiet, and the men shouted out challenges to fill the empty air.

Jaggers strode across the deck to the helm. There, at last, they saw someone. The helmsman could be seen, but was slumped over the wheel, not moving. The pirate captain pointed a pistol at the form.

"Get up!" he shouted. "The ship is ours! Hand over everything of value, and perhaps you will

live."

No response.

Jaggers stepped forward, and grabbed the man, trying to pull him up. The body felt oddly limp and stiff at the same time. A look into his eyes confirmed that the man had been dead for some time.

The men nearest him took a step back, dismay flashing across their faces. For while they would face any living foe without flinching, the sight of the dead awakened all the superstitions that persisted in the minds of sailing men.

"Look below deck," Jaggers ordered gruffly.

They hurried to obey their captain, leaving him alone with the dead man. Jaggers tossed it aside, and strode to the captain's quarters. If truth be told, he wanted to get away too. While he didn't believe in ghosts or curses, he disliked mysteries and the potential threats they brought.

The door was locked, so he kicked it open and went in. He knew before he saw the slumped

form that the captain of this increasing enigma had also died. The smell of the sea couldn't quite drown out the smell of decay. This time, however, Jaggers examined the body more thoroughly, trying to find out what could have happened. Clearly not a fight, for no other bodies were seen above deck. Indeed, he could see no holes in the clothing to indicate gunshot or stab wounds. The man's face didn't look frightened or aggressive, but drawn, as though ill. From what though, the pirate couldn't say, as no other sores or lesions could be seen.

He pulled out a bundle of papers that the dead captain had slumped over. Along with maps and manifests, Jaggers found the ship's handwritten log, and started to read.

30 April 1810

Picked up cargo of slaves and will head to the markets in

England. Skies clear. The next few entries were uneventful, so

Jagger kept perusing.

Slaves starting to sicken. Suspect one of them had pneumonia. Trying to isolate the most ill ones form the healthier so as not to contaminate the whole population.

No good. Virtually all slaves now sick. One or two of the crew coming down as well.

About twenty slaves have died. Their bodies have been thrown overboard, but I have a bad feeling that it will make no difference. One slave, a man named Lagoda, is now the only man below deck not affected.

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Crew beginning to die. They fear that a curse has been placed on the crew. The slave, Lagoda, has somehow smuggled a small fetish doll aboard. It doesn't help the crew's superstitions and morale, and I have threatened him with beatings if he doesn't surrender it. He merely laughs. I don't like him. I don't like his eyes.

Crew dying. I have the ship travelling as fast as it can back to the mainland, in hopes that the doctors can save some of us. Ill myself. God help us…

The narrative ended with smudge marks and a crocked line, as though the writer had collapsed in mid thought. Unnerved, Jaggers replaced the log, determined to never let the crew see it. A quick search revealed a pocket watch, hand mirror, and a few coins, but nothing substantial. And if this had been a slave ship, then sick or dead slaves couldn't even be sent to the black market. Disappointed, Jaggers turned to leave the cabin when Grubb barged in.

"Captain! You need to come below deck," the first

mate told him. "Why? What's happened?"

Grubb swallowed. "I don't know. Something. Are there any keys in here?"

Jaggers looked around, and saw a key ring hanging up on the wall by the captain's bed. He retrieved them, and then stepped back out into the sun.

All the men were back on deck. Some were counting a few pilfered coins, some were huddled in clusters murmuring, and all looked as though they were in a hurry to leave.

"Well?" he asked roughly.

"All dead, captain," one of the pirates volunteered. "All but that one…"

Jaggers scowled at them, not liking the show of cowardice. Though, to be fair, they hadn't read the brief account of plague. On that note…

"Return to the ship," he ordered. He pointed to two men. "You and you. Keep a lookout here.

Mr. Grubb and I will check out this prisoner."

The men practically jostled each other to obey. Jaggers went down the ladder to below deck, Grubb following.

First thing he noticed was the smell. Not only the smell of body odor, wasted, and sea salt, but the pungent smell of death that marked the cramped space to be a graveyard. White men lay in their bunks, or blocked the walkway, and had to be stepped over, as though they had fallen in the middle of guarding their prisoners.

Their captives were dead as well. Some shackled to the floor, others in cages. At the far end, one cage housed one occupant and this man indeed seemed to be alive. He was thin, dark, and dressed in rags. Who knew how long the man had been here alone. However, while gaunt, the eyes were active, as he stood to face the pirates.

"So," he said. "You have come to rescue me?"

Jaggers noted something else in the cell. In the corner was a wooden carved effigy of a woman dressed in some type of warrior garb and carrying weapons. The captain saw in this the fetish doll of the ship's log. Which must have meant that this was…

"Who are you?" Jaggers demanded. "How did you get here?"

"My name is Lagoda," he replied. "I'm a witch man. How I got here is this crew put me here.

How I get out depends on you.”

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He cocked his head to one side and smiled. Jaggers agreed with the other captain lying dead above. He didn't like the man's eyes. There was malice there, and mockery. Something not human.

Not that the pirate, for all his other vices, saw black men as less than white. He had killed plenty of other whites, while having black men among his crew. For him, there were only allies and enemies.
That was all.

He returned his gaze to Lagoda, and realized that he didn't like his smile any more than he liked his eyes. The gums reseeded from the teeth, giving the smile a feral, ghoulish look. It was a smile that the pirate found himself wanting desperately to remove.

He reached into his pocket, and held up the key ring.

"I am Captain Jaggers," he began. "In my hands I hold the power of life or death for you. I could let you free or leave you here."

He leaned in closer. "It will do you no good to appeal to my sense of humanity, for I have little regard for that. I sail for profit, and profit alone. So far, I see none. My crew doesn't either, and they would just as soon leave this ship to become another Dutchman. So…why should I free you?"

"As I said, I'm a witch man."

"Will you curse me if I leave you?"

He had hoped to anger Lagoda. To see the smug smile and dancing eyes disappear. Instead, the prisoner threw back his head and laughed what sounded like a rehearsed laugh.

“No, no. I offer you my services.”

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He picked up the doll, and held it in his hands. “This image is of my goddess. A powerful goddess she is. She speaks to the dead, raises them up to make sickness come upon the living. She struck down those who put me here, and sent you to deliver me. She would have you take me to your fatherland, and would reward you greatly. She brings prosperity to her servants and death to her enemies. She is Inana.”

Neither the name nor the image meant anything to the pirates. They had never heard the name, but supposed that it was some obscure tribal deity. They had heard similar tales from slaves and sailors before.

Still, none of the other heathen gods and spirits had struck down a crew, if that indeed was what had happened. Grubb seemed to be thinking that as well, for he tugged on his captain’s arm.

“Let’s get out of here, captain,” he said nervously. “I don’t like this. Something’s wrong, and the price of one slave isn’t enough to make it right.”

Lagoda knelt on the ground. Clasping the wooden image, his lips moved in what seemed to be some sort of prayer or incantation. Grubb stopped speaking. His eyes watered, and he put a hand on the cage bars to steady himself. He started coughing, a wet thick cough despite having one earlier.

Lagoda stood. “You see the power of the spirits,” he said. “A power that can be for you…or against you.”

Grubb continued to cough, and his eyes began glazing over. He sat down, and seemed to be fighting to stay conscious. Jaggers wouldn’t have believed it. Yet there it was before him. The answer to the riddle of the plague. No natural

explanation would suffice, only an infernal one.

He raised his pistol and pointed it at Lagoda’s head. “All right, that’s enough! Give me the idol,

now!”

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He thought he would have to shoot the man. Yet surprisingly, the prisoner complied. Jaggers grabbed the offered effigy through the bars, and threw it violently against the wall. A few pieces broke off, but Lagoda only laughed.

“You think that’s the reason people die? No, it is the spirits. The spirits could make any sicken and die. You, or your enemies.”

Grubb shook his head, and felt the disorientation slowly leave him. He coughed once more, spat, and stood up, well once more.

The two eyed Lagoda once more, and the man pointed to the keys.

“Let me out. Take me to England, and I will see to it that you are well paid on the way.”

“Captain…” Grubb began as he saw Jaggers moving in to comply. But before he could protest, Lagoda was free, and Jaggers led him back up the ladder.

“I won’t leave you where I can’t see you,” he decided aloud. “And you are one man only. Try that again, and my men will kill you.”

They all stood on the open deck. The two sentries eyed the slave, dismay in their faces.

Somehow, Grubb noted, they too sensed the wrongness of the man.

Jaggers, truth be told, was frightened too. But they said to keep one’s friends close and enemies closer. On that note, he had decided to see if he could use Lagoda’s magic to any advantage before finding out a surer way of disposing of him.

“The next ship we raid,” Jagger continued. “You will strike as you struck this one. Then, we will

see.”

II

The next day indeed saw another ship, and Jaggers looked for Lagoda. The slave had remained on deck all night, neither eating nor mixing with the crew. Perhaps that was for the best, Jaggers mused.

“We sighted another ship on the horizon,” the pirate informed Lagoda. He handed the spyglass to the latter, and Lagoda accepted it to see for himself. As he did, Jaggers noted that the nails of Lagoda’s thin hands were especially prominent, as though the flesh were slowly retreating from them. Moreover, there was an air of decay about him, probably form being surrounded by so much death himself for who knew how long.

This latter day grim reaper should have no trouble spreading death and disease. Whether through ‘spirits’ or some other means, Jaggers couldn’t say.

Lagoda handed the glass back. “Your men may board,” he told him. “They will be unharmed.

The others, however…”

He trailed off, and chuckled ghoulishly. Jaggers ordered his men to approach,

cannon blazing. The other ship returned fire, but the aim was way off.

Indeed, as Jaggers own ship drew closer,

he could see firsthand the people on deck struggling to maintain consciousness.

So Lagoda had spoken the truth. He turned to

his men. “Take them! The ship is ours!”

So it was. They readied their planks, boarded, and quickly cut down the

hapless crew with no casualties on their side. Shortly after, gold was found, and they all cheered.

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It would prove just one of many easy and successful raids as they headed for England, and Port Dixon. By and by, the crew had trusted Lagoda not to strike them with the strange sickness, and
appreciate his help. Except for Grubb. He had felt Lagoda's power firsthand. He wanted only to be rid of the man.

Lagoda, for his part, only minimally interacted with the crew. He spent virtually all of his time on deck, watching their distance from land slowly diminishing. Any conversation he kept, it must have been with Inana, his goddess.

III

Sheriff Jaffrey Pyncheon sat at a table in Port Dixon's only tavern. The town was but a small port, built to take the surplus deliveries form larger and more famous ports. Currently, business outside was slow, so business in here reflected that.

Apart from a few usual drunkards, the only person he saw was an old monk who called himself Brother Roland. What abbey or monastery he belonged to was a mystery to all, as was how he had
obtained the money to live in a small boarding house in town. He didn't work, as far as anyone knew, and spent most of his days idling away in the tavern. He was a good listener, but not much of a talker, saying little more about his past than that he had lived in France for years and had fled when all the political chaos had begun a generation ago.

Gabriel Grubb, one of Captain Jaggers' men, entered, and walked over to Pyncheon's table.

Sitting down, he motioned to the bartender for a drink, and he handed a bag to the sheriff.

Pyncheon took it, and began sifting through it without a word. After all, they weren’t friends. He accepted a bribe from the pirates and the promise that they wouldn’t bother the town too much, and he then conveniently forgot about them when anyone asked.

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Grubb's drink came, and he took it, draining it without a drop. Then he signaled for another.

Pyncheon's eyebrows went up when he as finished inspecting the payment. "Bigger than usual," he

commented as the pirate polished off his second pint. "Feeling generous or did you have a better…run than normal?"

"Good run," Grubb confirmed, nodding. "The best. Best ever."

His hands shook, and he looked around, only now taking note of anyone else in the place. The monk and the others paid them no attention, but he leaned in and lowered his voice just the same.

"I can't explain it. No, actually I can. But who'd believe it?"

"What happened?" Pyncheon asked. "Did you get caught by one of the royal navy? Are you being chased now?"

The man was scared; that much was clear. More so than Pyncheon had ever seen, which in turn made him nervous.

"No, nothing like that?"

"Well?"

"You'll say I'm

crazy." "Try me."

Grubb shook his head, not in refusal, but to clear his own thoughts.

"About three weeks ago, we came across this slave ship, right? Well, turns out everyone's dead from some plague. Except this one slave. Name of Lagoda. Claims to be a warlock or shaman or

something. Anyway, he takes credit for all the death. Captain frees him because he says he can help us. And he does. He does."

He stood up to go, shaking his head. "Enjoy your cut, sheriff. I don't think I can enjoy mine."

He left without another word. The sheriff wondered what Grubb could possibly mean. He didn't see that the old monk's gaze also turned to the door and the retreating pirate.

IV

Puncheon headed home after meeting with Grubb. He lived several blocks away from the docks and seedier parts of Port Dixon with his wife, Phoebe, and his five year old daughter, Charlotte. The sheriff smiled at the thought of his pretty little daughter growing up so fast. Only days ago, it seemed, he was holding a tiny infant in his arms. Then, before he knew it, he would have young men calling on her, asking for her hand.

Well, let the troubles of today suffice, or something like that, he thought. He only sporadically attended church, although his wife did more often. He worked long hours, and saved up all he had in hopes of sending Charlotte off to a good school.

He arrived at his town house, entered, and poured the bag of pirate loot on his kitchen table. Sifting through it he saw, among other pieces, a silver hand mirror. Puncheon picked it up, turned it over in his hands, and smiled. This piece he might just let Charlotte have now. She'd love it.

Footsteps sounded behind him, and the sheriff turned around. His wife, Phoebe, a tall, dark, attractive woman of thirty, approached. His smile faded, but

he nodded pleasantly at her.

She looked at the scattered loot on the table. “Captain Jaggers’ crew is back in town?” she

asked.

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“That’s right.”

She folded her arms, and shuddered. This was the biggest thing they disagreed on. She hated the fact that her husband took bribes rather than take a stand, and arrest the robbers as soon as they came on shore. Pyncheon had explained that the money he took was for Charlotte. When she tried to argue some high minded ideals about the ends not justifying the means, he had retorted that there would be no way to stop Jaggers and his men without bloodshed. If they escaped, the pirates would simply set up their headquarters elsewhere. And even if they did manage to kill every last member of Jaggers’ crew, what then? There would still be crime and sin in some form or another. There was simply no way to eliminate evil. The only practical thing one could do was contain it.

So that’s what he’d done. He’d made the deal, and in return, Jaggers and his men left the legitimate mariners in Port Dixon alone. They also kept their revelries to a minimum when between sea raids. As for their victims, well, if they were smart, they would cooperate with the pirates too, and wait on Almighty God to settle accounts on the final day of judgement.

The last time Pyncheon had tried to explain these things to his wife she had called him a coward. It had been a nasty fight, although the sheriff had never struck her in his life. Still, to his dismay, he had seen the love gradually fade from her eyes, until they only stayed together for their daughter’s sake.

“Is Charlotte awake yet?” he asked Phoebe, preferring to turn his mind to more pleasant thoughts.

She nodded. “I think so. I’ll make some breakfast.”

“Good. I have something for her.” He stood, and took the mirror. His wife folded her arms again, unimpressed. “From the plunder?”

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“Don’t worry about it,” he replied, frowning. He didn’t like her tone, and didn’t want a renewed argument.

“How many died for it?” she asked as he walked out to the hall

and up the stairs. “I said don’t worry about it,” he repeated, not

bothering to turn around.

He got to the door of his little girl’s room and

knocked. “Charlotte?” he called out.

She didn’t answer.

“Charlotte?” he said again. When she still failed to call back, the sheriff opened the door and

looked around. All in all, a typical girl’s room. Except for one thing. A blanket was draped over a chair. Underneath, he saw the movement of a squirming bundle.

Pyncheon smiled, and began speaking in a louder voice. “Oh dear. Where has she gone?

Maybe I should look for clues. How about the bed?”

The bundle under the chair shook as Pyncheon made a show of sifting

through the bedclothes. “No Charlotte. Maybe the closet?”

He stamped over to the closet, and opened the door. A muffled giggle sounded from under the blanket.

“Well, maybe I should just sit down and think about it.”

He went to sit on the blanket draped chair. A shriek sounded, and the blanket went flying. He caught a darting form as it tried to run between his legs.

“What’s this?” he demanded, in mock surprise, as he lifted a little girl in a white dress up to eye level with him. She was laughing and squirming and he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Good morning, daddy,” she said between laughter. “Did I fool you?”

“Yes you did, you naughty thing,” he said, setting her down in the chair. He stood over her and folded his arms.

“To think that I was ready to give you a present too,” he said sternly. Reaching over to the nightstand, he showed her the silver mirror. Her eyes widened with delight, and she clapped her hands.

“Now…should I give this to you or

not?” “Yes! Yes!”

He chuckled. “Oh very well. But be careful.”

She took it, and looked at herself in the mirror. Then she turned it over in her hands, admiring the bright, shiny craftsmanship. Finally, she looked into it again, and made a few faces in the reflection.

“It’s pretty, daddy,” she told him.

“So are you. Except when you make those

faces.” She grinned up at him, and he

took her hand.

“Come. Mother’s making breakfast. You can look in your mirror later.”

She left it on her bed as they walked out of the room. If they would’ve looked

back, they might have noticed something a little odd. Charlotte’s reflection didn’t leave the mirror the instant her real face turned away. Instead, it remained there, frozen in a silly smile for a few moments. Then the smile faded and its eyes looked from the left to the right. The reflection behaved almost like it wasn’t in a

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mirror, but a window, looking in and taking in the new surroundings. Then the little girl's face darkened and blurred into a shadow. This too lingered for a few moments before finally fading away, showing only the empty room.

Captain Jaggers had remained in town for about a month, not having to make any further raids for a while, owing to the success of the last run. He was tired, and needed to rest. He also needed to think about his guest.

Lagoda had stayed at his house during the interval, posing as Jaggers' new house slave. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth, as the man had had free run of the house. Furthermore, he had continued to practice his magic.

At first, only a few people in town had fallen ill. But the number had gradually risen until health officials had grown alarmed, quarantines had been ordered, and churches had been active almost around the clock with funerals and prayers.

None knew why. None except for Jaggers and his crew. He one day decided to confront Lagoda about it.

"Why?" he asked, walking into his parlor without any preamble. Lagoda stood there, looking out the window at the harbor below. Lagoda had stayed here since his arrival. He too had seemed to sicken. His skin had turned ashen, and he had begun to get festering sores on his body. The smell of death and decay had only increased, and the former slave now walked with a stiff, unsteady gait.

"What is that to you?" Lagoda replied. His veneer of smug geniality had decreased with time, and the arrogance and disdain for Jaggers had only increased.

“I paid my fare, did I not? Do you need compensation for my taking up your home?”

“No! Not that,” Jaggers said, quickly. He had grown more fearful of Lagoda as time had passed, too. Why did he ever rescue the man from the floating graveyard, still abandoned and drifting at sea? Why hadn’t he listened to Grubb?

“You paid to come to England,” Jaggers said soothingly. “And I thank you. But why do you poison my town? What do you want from us?”

Lagoda studied the pirate for a moment. “Do you really want to know? Very well. The goddess, Inana, has an ancient enemy. A family, who robbed her long ago. A family she has fought time and again, but have always eluded her.”

“Inana is real?” Jaggers asked, with perhaps more flippancy than he had intended. Lagoda’s eyes blazed with inhuman anger, and he raised his voice to match.

“Do not talk down to me, or speak if I haven’t a brain! Real indeed! Yes, she is real, and her vengeance is relentless. She will triumph!”

Jaggers took a step back, shaken by the sudden onset of fury. Lagoda paced the room in agitation, limping stiffly, but still moving with purpose.

“We know they came to England. They will recognize the signs of our presence, and will make their move.”

“What if you’re wrong?” Jaggers demanded. “Will you kill a whole town for nothing?”

Lagoda’s eyebrow rose. “Then I will move to the next place. Then the next. And keep moving until they come. The lost lives mean nothing.”

Jaggers raised his pistol. “No. I didn’t bargain for this.”

He shot Lagoda point blank, and the former slave fell. Jaggers breathed in a sigh of relief, and went over to inspect the body. He turned it over.

And saw the eyes still open. Lagoda grabbed the pirate’s legs, and pulled him down. Before Jaggers knew it, he was being choked by arms that should’ve been dead.

“You thought I summoned the spirits,” Lagoda said, as spots began to swim in front of his eyes. “You’re wrong. I am the spirit. I took on this dead flesh to travel farther than the goddess, the necromancer, could send me on her own. Now, I will need new skin.”

Jaggers thrashed, and tried to fight off the attacker. A growing sense of horror rose within him, even as consciousness left him.

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V

Phoebe Pyncheon had ordered Charlotte to stay indoors when the illnesses began. Especially when a few of the very old and very young had died from whatever it was that was happening.

Hephzibah looked out of the window of her daughter’s upstairs room, and whispered a silent prayer for the dead. She could think of nothing else to do, and could only hope that her family wouldn’t have to ever endure such a thing.

Charlotte sat at a small table, sharing tea with a couple stuffed animals, and chatting away. Hephzibah was thankful that she at least was carefree, not having to worry about either illnesses or husbands who engaged in criminal

activities.

“Mama?” Charlotte called. “Could you get my mirror, please?”

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She frowned slightly before she turned to face her little girl. The mirror only served as a daily

reminder of Jaffrey's corruption; at least the other loot went into a bank where she couldn't see it. She hadn't wanted it in her house, but Charlotte adored it because it came from her father.

He was a good father. She supposed she couldn't leave him even if she wanted to. True, he had never exactly been unkind. But why did he have to get mixed up in this pirate business?

"Where is it, honey?" she asked.

Charlotte pointed to her nightstand. "Over there."

Phoebe nodded absently, walked over, and picked up the mirror. She looked at her own reflection for a moment, noting the somewhat haggard look that stared back. She really should try to get some more sleep.

Then she frowned. In the mirror's reflection, she saw Charlotte sitting at her table with her toys.

But across from the girl, she saw another figure sitting. It was roughly man shaped, and she couldn't make out any details. Startled, she whirled around.

Charlotte was sitting down, completely alone. Phoebe blinked, and looked back into the mirror again. Only her own normal reflection could be seen.

"Mama?" Charlotte asked from the table. "What's wrong?"

She hesitated, but then shook her head. Handing the mirror to her daughter, Phoebe decided to get some extra sleep tonight.

"Nothing, sweetheart. Just play."

Charlotte coughed, and tried to get comfortable in her bed. It was no use. Her body ached, and her throat felt raw with inflammation.

She had been inside for days, but it hadn't done any good. Yesterday, she too had gotten sick.

Her mother had given her some medicine to help her sleep, but had only made her head spin.

Weakly, she glanced over at her nightstand. The bottle was still there, along with her mirror. She was alone; her mother had stepped out for a moment. Reaching for the mirror, she beheld her reflection. Already the color had left her, and her skin looked as cold and clammy as it felt.

She looked at herself, turning her head to the left and to the right. At first, her reflection behaved as it always had. But then, it started to act a little differently.

The face in the mirror began to turn in the opposite direction of where she moved. Then, it stopped moving and simply stared at her, no matter what Charlotte did. She wondered if she was just having her eyes play tricks on her. Then, her reflection spoke to her.

"Charlotte," it called, using her voice, although the real Charlotte

wasn't speaking. "Charlotte, are you ill?"

She slowly nodded at her reflection to say that she was. Again, the reflection didn't move with her. It was almost as if it was a separate person altogether.

"Charlotte, are you ill?" it continued. "Do you want to

be better?" Charlotte nodded vigorously until her

head hurt.

“Poor, poor Charlotte. It’s not going to get better. That’s what life is. Pain. Pain and suffering.

God doesn’t see. God doesn’t care. Why not end it?”

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Charlotte shook her head, her eyes welling up with tears. She didn't understand all of what was being said to her, but didn't like the sound of it. It sounded bad. It sounded wrong.

"Take your medicine, Charlotte," the reflection continued. "Then you will sleep. Sleep. Then, mama and daddy can rest too."

She put the mirror on the nightstand, face down. She didn't want to hear any more. But the voice, her voice, kept talking softly from the mirror.

"Do it, Charlotte. Do it now. Drink your medicine. Sleep. Now.

Now. Now." She tried to ignore it. But it kept talking,

whispering, cajoling.

"Now. Do it now."

Only half aware of what she was doing, Charlotte reached for the bottle of sedative. She put it to her lips, and began to drink it like water when her mom came back in.

Phoebe cried out, and grabbed the bottle away, but she had already drunk most of it.

"Charlotte! What are you doing?!" she demanded, panicked. Charlotte couldn't reply, for her vision blurred and she felt very tired. Hephzibah shook her, trying desperately to keep her awake, but Charlotte slipped gently into unconsciousness.

Phoebe's mind whirled, not knowing what to do next. She thought about getting her husband, but wasn't sure where on his patrol he would be. Besides,

what could he do? She needed to send for

the doctor, needed to get a messenger out while she stayed at her daughter's side, needed to...

A faint giggle sounded from the nightstand. She started, not thinking anyone else was in the room with her. She looked first at the side of the bed, and then all around, not seeing any other people.

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She pulled up the blankets over Charlotte, and felt both her forehead, and her nose for signs of breath. She was breathing, shallowly, but breathing. Phoebe was about to quickly go downstairs to summon a messenger, when the laughter sounded again.

Phoebe frowned and paused. When the laughter came softly for the third time, she got the idea that it was, in fact, coming from the mirror itself. She slowly, hesitantly, picked it up, and held it in front of her.

At first, she saw only her own reflection. Then something changed. Her mirror image smiled at her, giving her an expression that had never crossed her flesh and blood countenance. A haughty, evil smile, full of malice and contempt for all. Then the mouth opened, and the image began to laugh at the dumbfounded mother.

As the laughter continued, the face changed, discoloring, and turning ashen gray. Dark circles came under the eyes, and the hair began to thin and grey out. The lips curled form the rotting teeth, and the skin began to grow sores and scabs.

Phoebe found herself beholding a corpselike version of herself. Shrieking, she threw the mirror against the far wall, and heard the satisfying crunch of broken glass. Of course she had heard all the old superstitions, but didn't care. All she knew was that an evil presence had somehow made its way into her home. It was threatening them now, threatening Charlotte now. As a mother, she wouldn't tolerate any threat to home and family.

She ran over to the fallen mirror, and began to dash it against the floor, again and again. The remaining glass fell out, and Phoebe put the handle down on it. She stood, and stamped it, grinding her foot into the floor, and pulverizing the glass.

Then, she bent back down, and began smashing the handle

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over and over against the floor. She felt tears run down her cheeks, and heard a strangled sob from her throat, and knew she was going into hysterics, but kept smashing the handle.

"I know what I saw, Jaffrey," Phoebe told her husband hours later.

Sheriff Pyncheon turned over the twisted silver remains of his daughter's gift. In the other room, the doctor was examining Charlotte, who had fallen into a coma from an apparent overdose of medication. Then his wife had come to him with this crazy story about ghosts and demons.

"You think this thing was haunted?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes! Think about it. These sicknesses didn't happen before Jaggers returned with this. What about the other houses? What about the banks? Do you know who else took from his stolen goods?"

"No, it hadn't worked that way," Pyncheon argued. "The bankers aren't any better or any worse than anyone else. Besides, neither Captain Jaggers nor I have been ill. So if you're saying the loot is
cursed or haunted…"

"I don't know!" Phoebe cried. "All I know is what I saw. Our

daughter's in a coma…" "I know that!"

"And there has to be a reason! This isn't natural; someone's behind it."

"Phoebe, not everything that happens is someone's fault," Pyncheon protested, rubbing his forehead. "Some things are just…life."

“Just life,” Phoebe echoed, glowering at him. “That’s good. That’s wonderful! So you don’t have to do anything about it. You never do.”

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She was scared and angry, and was taking it out on him. He still stiffened though, and felt a flash of anger.

"I'll go to Jaggers," he said after a pause. "I'll ask if he knows anything about it, all right?"

"Do what you want," Phoebe muttered. She coughed once, turned, and ran to her room. There was the slam of a door, and Jaffrey was alone. He thought about going after her. Thought about saying that he was sorry, that he loved her and Charlotte, and was worried too. Thought about it, but did nothing.

He sighed, and headed for the front door.

The sheriff crossed town and knocked on the pirate captain's door. To his surprise, the first mate, Grubb, answered. The nervous man looked around, and behind Pyncheon before asking him why he was here.

"I need to speak with the captain," Pyncheon told him.

"Right now." "Come on then," Grubb replied.

The pirate led Pyncheon into Jaggers' parlor. To his surprise, all of the crew was there. That was odd enough, given that they usually didn't stay together in town. But even more disconcerting, there was a body on the floor, covered in a sheet.

"What is the meaning of this?" Pyncheon demanded, temporarily forgetting the reason for his visit at the current sinister sight.

“I could ask you the same,” Jaggers answered. But he reached down and uncovered the head of the body. Pyncheon saw that it was the slave, Lagoda.

“He died just the other night,” Jaggers said. “It would seem that his witchcraft couldn’t protect him from whatever is plaguing the rest of the town.”

“Good riddance, I say,” Grubb said. Jaggers gave the man a look, and he said no more.

“I’ve sent for a hearse to take him to the nearest crematorium,” Jaggers told Pyncheon. “Then we are leaving down until the plague dies out.”

“Probably for the best,” Pyncheon agreed. He held up the remnant of the mirror. “Jaggers, do you remember this?”

Jaggers took the mirror and looked at it. “I believe it was in the same ship where we found Lagoda. Why?”

He thought about Phoebe’s claims and found himself reluctant to tell them to the pirate. “I don’t know. Just…would you put it with the body, so it gets destroyed as well?”

Jaggers’ eye sparkled with amusement, but he nodded. “All right.” He placed the wreckage under the sheet, and covered the face back up.

A knock sounded on the door. The hearse had arrived, and two attendants came in to retrieve the body. Then Pyncheon followed them out to the hearse and watched as the grim horse drawn carriage took its burden out of the city.

From inside, the pirates were making plans amongst themselves to leave town. Pyncheon heard some stray bits of the conversation ending with Jaggers telling his men “We will triumph.”

It was an odd phrase that the sheriff hadn't heard from the captain before. Still, he supposed, the events of the last month were affecting them all.

He returned to his home shortly thereafter. He checked in on charlotte, and then looked for Phoebe. He wanted to talk to her, to reassure her that both the mirror and the pirates were gone. Even though he didn't believe anything supernatural was going on with this plague, still, he wanted to reassure her.

He entered the bedroom and saw her sprawled on the top of the blanket. As he approached, he saw that sweat had soaked her brow, and that she was also breathing shallowly. He shook her, but found to his dismay that she too was succumbing to the plague. Whatever the explanation for it was, the mirror hadn't been it.

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VI

Sheriff Pyncheon was once again drinking alone in the tavern, feeling like it was one of the few safe places left. The strange pneumonia like plague had swept through Port Dixon and all had suffered loss of some kind, whether directly or indirectly. Now, since the illness was largely keeping the streets empty, he was hoping to simply wait it all out here.

Gabriel Grubb came in, and came over as soon as he saw the sheriff. He sat down, and had the same look of fear that he had had before.

"Sheriff, you've got to help me," he said in a low voice.

"I have my own problems, Grubb," he said, thinking of his sick and possibly dying wife and daughter. "Besides, weren't you supposed to be leaving town?"

“Because of the plague. Yes, yes, that’s part of it all,” Grubb said. “Lagoda, the plague, all of it.

By now, the body should be burned…”

“Which shows he had nothing to do with it.”

“But the captain has changed. Won’t eat or sleep anymore. Stares out the window like Lagoda did. Keeps us all there, but puts off us actually going on another raid. I think Lagoda has possessed him, or whatever spirit was in that body.”

“What do you mean?” the sheriff demanded. He had never liked the pirates, despite taking their money, but all this other talk sounded too fantastic, too horrible to ignore.

“I don’t know what I mean. Only… maybe you can check it out. Please.”

Pyncheon sighed. He thought Grubb was losing his nerve, if not his mind. But maybe it wouldn’t be the worst idea to meet with Jaggers again. Get more perspective on what had happened on that last voyage that had spooked Grubb so much.

“All right, Grubb. I will go over and see him.”

“Wait! Not now. I don’t want him to know I told anyone. Come to my rooms this evening, and I can try to sneak you into the captain’s house.”

He stood, and looked around the tavern once more. Only Roland was there, looking down at his drink and apparently half asleep. So he turned and left the sheriff alone with his decision.

Hours later, Pyncheon walked through the empty streets of town. Grubb lived in a broken down building near the docks. Why he was going, he really couldn't say, except that he wanted answers to whatever was going on.

He heard the coughing before he even reached Grubb's door. Filled with a sudden unexplained sense of urgency, he rushed in the door. As he opened it, he saw the pirate lying down on his bead, his face ashen, his eyes glazed over. He too had been infected.

Grubb saw Pyncheon, and tried to speak, but violent coughs raked his entire body. He sat up, trying to cough up phlegm, but was clearly choking. Pyncheon stood, alarmed and dumbfounded, as the pirate breathed his last. Whatever secrets he had would remain so for now.

A movement out of the corner of his eye alerted him, and he whirled around. A figure ran out the door. Crying out, the sheriff chased it out into the street. He saw only a shadow, however, running in the direction of Jaggers' house.

So, the pirates were doing more than just robbing the seaways. He would need help; this time he couldn't simply take a bribe or look the other way. His family and his city were dying. They had to be sent away for good, alive or dead.

"Sheriff Pyncheon," a voice called out.

He turned, and to his great surprise, saw the old monk, Roland. No longer drinking, no longer dazed. Fully awake and intense, he ran up to the sheriff.

"I've been listening to every word that man told you. I know what you

are up against." VII

“What have you heard?” Pyncheon demanded.

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Roland shook his head. “Oh, I know about your bribes; that’s not what I mean. That’s between you and God. This business, however…”

He pointed in the direction where they had both seen the shadow. A shadow cast by no body, he realized.

“Yes, I’ve seen such things before,” he said. “Many years ago in France, there was a town near my abbey that had similar sufferings. Unexplained disease, shadows moving between the houses like angels of death. Even skin walkers, spirits possessing the bodies of the dead until the decay became too much for them to use.”

“How? How could you know that?”

Roland hesitated. Should he tell the crooked city official everything? How much time did he have?

With a sigh, he walked into Gabriel Grubb’s room. He looked at the body, said a prayer, and faced the sheriff once more.

“My family, my father, brother, and sister in law, once encountered a great evil. A cult led by a necromancer whose spirits cause death and disease.”

“Why?” Pyncheon asked. “Why would they do that? Sacrifice?”

“In a sense,” Roland went back outside, looking up and down the street. “The necromancer long ago allied herself with a demon who wants to break into our world. My family stole one of her magical items, and have kept it from her ever since. We’ve tried to have as few children as possible, so that only a few would have to bear the burden and would find it easier

to hide. If more children were born, we

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loved them, of course, and brought them up, but then sent them away as adults so that they wouldn't be involved."

"You talk like this has gone on for some time," Pyncheon said.

Roland didn't answer, and walked to the street in the direction of the jail. There, Pyncheon's guards and deputies would most likely be, except for the ones off duty.

"We fought the necromancer in France, and then fled here. After a few years, I persuaded my brother, his wife, and their two children to flee to America, in case she still lived. They took the tablet and my cross. I told them never to contact me again, lest she find them. I stayed behind, listening, watching, waiting to see if she would return, and if I needed to throw her off the trail. It's been lonely, but I was right. God help us, I was right."

By 'she' Pyncheon assumed the old monk meant the necromancer. What the tablet and cross were, he had no idea. It sounded like ranting, but he too had seen the shadow.

Still, he felt as if he were missing part of the story. Like he was coming in at the last act. He wished Roland would stop and try to explain more, but the monk opened the door to the jail, and motioned the sheriff in.

"Hurry, sheriff," Roland said. "We must hurry."

Later, Sheriff Pyncheon and Roland led a group of armed men up the hill to Captain Jaggers' house. The wind had picked up, but it was otherwise a clear, cold and quiet night. For the moment.

“Jaggers!” Sheriff Pyncheon called out, banging violently on the door.

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“We know you’re in there. Show yourself!”

The door creaked open, but no words greeted them. Warily, the men looked at one another, and moved in. Past the front door was the parlor, surprisingly well lit. At the far end, a bay window showed a full view of the sea, as the house backed right against a cliff overlooking the ocean.

They heard the sound of footsteps, and saw Jaggers standing at the top balcony overlooking the parlor. On either side of him were several pirates armed with muskets.

“You should have taken your gold, and stayed away, Pyncheon,” the pirate captain said.

The sheriff frowned. The pirate indeed seemed different. His voice sounded more hollow, and his movements were stiff, as though the stiffness of death were already in his bones. He remembered what Grubb had said to him before he dies. Something about the spirit that had been in Lagoda.

“That’s not Jaggers,” Roland whispered. “It’s a skin walker, a spirit using a corpse. I’ve seen them before.”

“You’ve gone too far this time, Jaggers,” Pyncheon called back.

“Open fire,” Jaggers told his men. They did, and the shots rained down from the top of the stairs, hitting two of Pyncheon’s men before they ran for cover.

‘Jaggers’ led the other pirates down the stairs into the parlor, where the sheriff’s party had run and ducked behind the furniture. They returned fire, hitting one of the pirates as well as Jaggers himself.

The pirate died, but Jaggers staggered forward, looking for Roland. The old

monk was his true target. Both sides reloaded, and fired at each other. More died on both sides, but Jaggers' possessed body moved on.

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He had nearly traversed the room, when Roland stepped out from his hiding place. The monk backed up to the window as his enemy narrowed his eyes and closed the distance between them.

At first, 'Jaggers' eyed Roland warily, but then smiled in mingled relief and smugness.

"You don't have the cross anymore," he declared. "The one you used to defeat us before."

"No. It's with my family," Roland confirmed. "So is the tablet. You will never find them. Neither will Inana. Did she survive? Is that why you still hunt me?"

"That you would like to know, wouldn't you? But even she cannot keep us in this world this long and this far away. So I had to take on flesh to walk in."

"An emissary, instead of fighting herself. How the mighty Apsu have fallen."

"You, who run and hide, say such things?" the skin walker demanded. Behind them, the pirates and peacekeepers continued their shootout. A stray bullet hit the possessed cadaver in the arm. He grimaced, more in annoyance than pain.

"Come, enough of this. Surrender yourself and your family. Or watch this down continue to

die."

"I sent them away," Roland said, looking down. "I ordered them not to tell me where, or to contact me again."

"You lie."

Roland felt his throat constricting. He coughed, and felt his upper trachea inflaming as though he had had respiratory sickness for weeks. Behind them, the

few remaining combatants dropped their guns, feeling the same symptoms.

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Roland saw that the spirit intended to make good on its threat. It would kill all here, out of malice, until its host finally wore out. If it was to be defeated, it needed to be deprived of any flesh it could inhabit.

But how to deprive it of skin to walk in? How to break its tenuous hold on this world? He no longer had the cross; he only had himself.

Then, he had an idea. An idea that would surely take his life, although, god willing, his soul would be protected from damnation by the one who had always been Savior to him.

He was old. He had lost or sent away all that was dear to him. He had stayed only for this purpose.

“Your flesh is rotting away, while your task is unfinished,” he said, his voice already hoarse. “If you would know all that I do, come and possess me. My life for this towns.”

“You?” Disbelief registered on ‘Jaggers’’ face. “You would have to open yourself, give yourself

freely.”

“I will. I do.”

Sheriff Pyncheon, meanwhile, gunned down the last of the pirates. Now he and two surviving deputies reloaded their muskets, stood, and fired into the body of the pirate captain.

‘Jaggers’ snarled, but fell to the ground. Roland could see nothing, but rather felt the onslaught of darkness as the spirit entered him. No, not spirit. Spirits. Inana had placed several within the body of the slave Lagoda and sent them forth.

It explained how their effects had been so far reaching, despite the necromancer’s physical absence.

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They pawed and pried at his mind, and Roland gripped his head and screamed. Pyncheon and the other deputies ran to him, but he pushed them away. They couldn't get too close. The spirits had been able to exchange skins because of closeness to other hosts.

Now, they were sifting through his mind, trying to unearth the information they sought. Where were his brother and family? Where was the seventh tablet?

They uncovered the memory of the last time he had seen them. Years ago, on a clear morning, he had stood on the Port Dixon pier. Roger, his wife Constance, and their children, Jean and Ruth, had been boarding a ship bound for America. After much discussion, they had agreed to go there; in the event that the necromancer still lived, she must be kept in the dark s to their whereabouts.

"Are we never to see you again, uncle?" Ruth asked. She was in her late teens now, and was blossoming into a beautiful young woman. All the women of their family had been beautiful, both within and without. It had always been said among them that they still resembled Ninshabar, the mother of their line.

"No, Ruth. You must not even write me," he had said.

She hugged him, her expressive eyes welling with tears. She had always loved him. From her childhood, she had loved to listen to his stories, both biblical and relating to family history. At her suggestion, he had written down an account, drawn from earlier sources, and given it to her brother, who would also keep the seventh tablet. For they knew their charge, and knew that they must both remain hidden, and eventually separate, lest Inana find one and try to blackmail the other.

"But you will be alone," she said. "And what if she never comes? What if she really is dead?"

“If she never comes, then I can die in peace,” Roland had said softly. “Happy that I did my part.

If she does come, I will fight her to my death if I must, for you must be safe.”

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“But you don’t even have your cross,” she said. It was now around her neck, for he had given it to her that morning. She reached for her neck, to remove and return it, but he gently took her hands in his to prevent it.

“No, you must keep it, Ruth,” he told her. “It is the one thing she will fear. It will protect you and your children.

She looked at him, and he smiled. “Yes. You will find a man, a good Christian husband. You will be happy, and in time, God willing, these things will only become distant memory.”

“Not so distant,” she promised. “I’ll never forget you, uncle.”

“Dearest,” he said, hugging her once more and giving her a kiss on her forehead. “We will meet again. Just not in this life.”

He said his goodbyes to the others and stood on the dock as the ship sailed away. He hadn’t seen the ship disappear over the horizon, for his own eyes had been filled with tears. Then he was alone.

Over the years, he had lived quietly, listening to all the talk of the port’s comings and goings. He knew about Sheriff Pyncheon’s deal with the pirates, but hadn’t bothered repeating it. He figured it was between them and God. Although he felt sad for, and prayed for the victims, he had to watch and wait.

In his head, the spirits howled with rage and dismay. Sure enough, the other de Beaumonts hadn’t even written him; he really didn’t know where they were. They had only drawn out a dead end with their malice.

Now that malice turned back on him a hundredfold. They would rip his mind to shreds. They would turn all their power to cause sickness son him. He would die slowly and painfully before they turned back to Port Dixon itself.

Roland screamed again, and nearly gagged on the phlegm that now welled up in his throat. He had the sensation of something hammering his skull form the inside. He tried to think, to pray to God for guidance. He no longer had his cross, but surely he still had the favor of the One it represented.

Kill him, he heard voices in his head whisper. Destroy him! Make him pay!

Pyncheon watched, horrified, as he saw Roland's body turn grey and ashen. The old monk screamed again and writhed on the floor. Then, he began coughing and foaming at the mouth. For a moment, the lawman thought that there might be more than one shadow there, but couldn't be sure.

He will die the voices in Roland's head continued. Only, we must first find other skins. If none other is close, we will return to Nergal.

Yes, another voice whispered. Kill the sheriff. Take his form.

Roland heard, and understood. The spirits couldn't inhabit a living, unwilling host. Only the willing and the dead. That was the answer.

He staggered to his feet, and looked at the window. The house was on a cliff overlooking the ocean. That was the answer. Cast himself into the sea, and the spirits' hold on the world would be broken. They would return to their own realm, and Port Dixon would be spared.

But, he hesitated. Would such an act not be suicide? A sin, possibly leading to damnation? His life he would give, but his soul?

As he thought this however, yet another impression came into his frenzied brain. No, not a suicide. A martyr. His salvation would still be in the hands of the Savior, for such a death would be of love for the world's people, rather than despair.

Whatever you do, do it quickly.

Pyncheon watched as Roland stood, and ran towards the window. Too stunned to stop him, he saw the man staggering and moving in a jerky manner, as though something was pulling him back. Then with a final cry, he crashed through the glass and was gone.

Snapped out of their daze, Pyncheon and his men ran to the broken window. Of the monk, they saw no sign. However, on the surface of the water, they saw what looked to be humanoid shadows on the surface of the waves. Then, they were gone, and a weight was lifted.

Epilogue

Almost overnight, the sickness cleared. People called it a miracle, and Sheriff Pyncheon wasn't one to argue.

The pirates' bodies were all buried. As was the body of Roland de Beaumont, when it was found washed up on shore. For the latter, a full service was given by the church, and the sheriff was glad that they could do this small favor for the one who had saved them.

Jaggers' house was slated to be torn down, and the land sold. Pyncheon donated almost all of his bribes to the church, and resolved to attend regularly. He had begged Phoebe and Charlotte's forgiveness when they had recovered, and his wife had agreed to give him another chance. He knew that giving back the money

was the easy part. Repairing his marriage would be the hard task. But anything worthwhile was difficult, and he finally realized that he loved her more than easy money.

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He also knew now that evil couldn't be ignored or bargained with. It had to be confronted, and in the end, given to the Savior of the world.

He wondered if the mysterious necromancer of whom Roland spoke yet lived, and if she would ever attain her goals. He had so many questions about it all, but supposed that he would never know. He could only remain on guard, and hope that the targets of her wrath would do the same.

A slave ship pulled out of Port Dixon. Below, some crewmen were heading below decks to inspect their prisoners. The recent plague had killed several, and they needed to make sure that the remaining ones would survive long enough to arrive in America. Once they were away from the shore, they would have to fling over the dead into the ocean.

To their surprise, they saw that there were no dead. All of them lived, although they seemed to make up two groups. One group huddled together, as far away from the other group as possible. The second one moved stiffly, but seemed otherwise all right. One of them was even carving an image of one of their pagan goddesses in a spare hunk of wood.

The carver looked over at the crewmen and smiled. The sailor in front felt a nervousness he couldn't quite place his finger on.

"What's your name?" he asked, not sure he recognized the man.

"My name is Lagoda, good master," the man replied, not entirely reverent.

The man would have reprimanded the slave, but only felt more nervous at the sound of the strange name. After mumbling a few words about remembering

his place, he led the other sailors back above deck.

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Lagoda looked over at the other slaves, who shrank from his gaze. He smiled; the search for the seventh tablet would continue. Even he couldn't see the future, though. If he could, then he would know that in the end it would be he who found the necromancer's enemies for her.

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Haunting I

Under the cover of darkness, Roland and Roger snuck up the far side of the hill. After leaving Father Zanone, they had made their way around Mejnor and made sure that they were well beyond the familiar path and the smaller village that had Inana's followers.

Roland looked back, and saw a group of Mejnor's peasants, led by Father Zanone, walking up the path. Several carried torches to light the way, and in the torchlight they could see that a few of the village had muskets. A farmer or two had a pitchfork, and a few others carried clubs.

"They are coming through," Roger said, thankful that there was no way the brave men wouldn't be spotted. All the better to sneak into the house of silence, while attention would be directed outward.

Shouts could be heard from Inana's followers, and soon they saw another group coming forth on the path to meet the villagers. Some of Inana's men demanded an explanation, and Roland could Father Zanone arguing with them. He couldn't hear what was going on, but could see the argument becoming heated.

Roger put his hand on his brother's shoulder, and they turned to keep climbing the hill. The people of Mejnor had found their courage because of them. Now they had to keep their part of the bargain.

They reached the castle walls, and began to look for the crack. As they rounded, a shot rang out from the crowd below. Roland quickly turned, and saw a smoking musket, and one of Inana's men dead. Shouting could be heard on both

sides, and they could see Inana’s followers pulling out and brandishing swords and daggers. Soon, an all-out brawl began.

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“And…cut!” a new voice called.

The men stopped their fighting, and looked around. From the right side of the hill, floodlights came on, causing them to blink. A bearded, wiry college aged man appeared. He looked around expectedly. This was the director, Emil Fowler, on his first assignment for Edison Studios, in the Bronx. For his project, he was making a feature film based on a legend he had just learned from the screenwriter, one Frieda Lillian Vance.

She was an actress on Broadway and former girlfriend of his cameraman, Kyle Hunter, who had worked as a stagehand before venturing into film. They had even lived together for a time, despite her parents’ objections. However, while their relationship hadn’t worked out, they still remained friends. Kyle had told Emil that she wanted to cross over into the emerging world of film as well, and had even written plays under F.L. Vance to conceal her gender from the more sexist members of the public.
Showing him copies of Frieda’s plays, Emil had become fascinated at once with one entitled the Mejnor Hauntings.

It took place in the small French town of Mejnor, and said that in the eighteenth century, a mysterious plague had decimated the town. People had sickened and died, and mysterious shadowy figures had been seen. Furthermore, there were even rumors of the dead rising from their graves and monsters attacking at night.

A woman calling herself Lady Pisani had moved into the abandoned Mejnor castle. And apparently she was the reason behind the supernatural occurrences, for they ended when a monk named Roland de Beaumont and his brother Roger had

arrived in town to rally the people against the people living in and near the castle. They alleged that Lady Pisani was in fact Inana, an ancient necromancer who had lived for centuries and sought to release a demon named Nergal upon the world.

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There had been a fight, and the noblewoman had vanished, along with her people. But the town still remembered, and had reportedly shunned the castle to this day.

Fowler thought it would make a fine motion picture, and the manager, William Gilmore, had agreed. So he had been given a grant to create the picture, and had hired Frieda to help him adapt the play into a screenplay. She would also play the part of Inana, the necromancer. Some local actors had been hired as extras and to reenact the two brothers leading the townspeople up the hill.

"Okay, good job guys," Fowler said, nodding

his approval. "All right?" an actor asked. "It

was only one take."

"I think the atmosphere will sell the scene," Fowler replied. He looked over his shoulder at some other men standing by the cameras at the edge of the path.

"Let's shoot one more scene of Roland getting up and heading for the castle. Then I think we'll call it a night."

He looked at his actors. "Okay. I want you to rise up slowly. You want to feel safe enough to go forward before you make any sudden moves."

"Right, right," the actor playing Roland replied. "Can we get on with it? I told my wife I'd be home at a decent hour tonight."

"We are getting paid this week, aren't we?" the actor hired to play Roger asked.

Fowler made a face. This was the part of the business that he discovered he liked the least.

Fortunately, Gilmore was producing the documentary, and paying all

the actors himself. “Yes, we’re being paid this week,” he said.

“One more scene, I promise.”

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About an hour later, they had finished the reenactment of the raid, and were all walking back into the studio headquarters. Emil led his cast and crew to his office to finish any remaining paperwork. A few more words with the actors, and they either left on foot, or got into their cars and drove out of the parking lot. The year was 1910, and already automobiles were making more regular appearances on the road, although only so many could afford them. Emil didn't have one yet, but hoped that his work on this picture would change that.

Soon he was left alone with Kyle. The two carried their equipment to a storage room. Outside the door, Frieda was waiting for them; so far, he hadn't shot any footage with her.

"Hello," she remarked. "Get what you needed?"

"What I wanted to do today, yes," Emil replied, sitting next to her. He noted her dark hair and eyes, not for the first time, and thought she would make a lovely leading lady, albeit an evil one. While some girls didn't want to play a vamp, Frieda was eager to just get her first part in the newly developing motion picture industry. They had become friends, and he hoped that all three of them would work together on multiple projects after this one.

"Mr. Gilmore called," Frieda said. "He wanted to know what timeframe you had in mind for a rough cut."

Emil sighed. "Yes, I know. I sorry, but I'm still not ready for your scenes yet. Kyle and I got the approach to the castle and a few shots of the battles."

Frieda grunted, and held up a copy of the script.

"We've had to work backwards since my scenes aren't finalized yet," she

remarked. “But I think these scenes would do better with less dialogue. Maybe I could do more standing over during the

charge of the townspeople”

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“We could do a shot that way,” Emil agreed. “It’ll keep production costs down since fewer sets would be needed. But I have to show more than that. Nobody, least of all Mr. Gilmore, will want to pay for nothing but one scene of people charging.

“Not that you aren’t doing great,” Emil added quickly. “I’m just looking at the challenge to myself.”

“Yeah, me too,” Kyle said. He looked out a window. “I got a few shots of the castle set before the sun went down. It’s pretty creepy at night, though.”

Emil looked out the window as well. In the moonlight and street lights, he could barely see a

crumbling, boarded up facade with a collapsed porch and several holes in the roof. He didn’t have any pictures of what the real castle in France looked like. But then, he supposed that no one else watching would either.

“Come on,” Kyle said, after a minute. “Let’s get out of here. I’m

hungry anyway.” “Fine. I’ll check my mail,” Emil said. “Good night,

Kyle. Frieda.”

“Good night, Emil,” she smiled. “Tomorrow we shoot

my scenes?” “You have my word.”

They left as he checked his mailbox in the main office. He saw, among other things, another application for an actress. The candidates name was Michaela Stewart, and the accompanying picture showed him a woman with olive skin, dark hair, and dark eyes. Not unlike Frieda, actually, although sterner and fiercer. He wondered…

Of course he had already hired Frieda for the role of Inana. On the other hand, he had been advised to go with his gut on things and to give any promising new talent a shot before they were picked

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up by rival studios. Maybe, he could cast her for another part? He could always change the script and write another character in, which in turn might make the picture more interesting if he was only working with limited sets.

He called over the secretary and asked her to contact Ms. Stewart and set up an interview.

II

The next day, a soft knock sounded on his door, and he looked up. Opening the door, he found himself confronted with the woman in the picture. In person, he decided that she wasn't as attractive as Frieda, but had an intensity that no other woman he had ever met had. Indeed, the eyes were already looking him over, as if he was applying for a job as much as her.

"You are Emil Fowler?" she asked in a voice that sounded confident, reliable, but at the same time cold.

Emil, however, believed that everyone deserved a chance to prove themselves, so he nodded. "That's right. Michaela?"

He held out his hand and she shook it. He stood aside to let her into the office. Once they each sat at a chair on opposite sides of the desk, Emil began the interview.

"Tell me; are you new to the area? I don't remember seeing you before."

"I am not. However, I have had no interest in the motion picture industry until I saw your advertisement."

She looked at him, almost challengingly again, making the director shift in his

chair nervously. “Okay. But you were interested in the main role I have for my documentary?”

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“I am. You see, while I’m not a film student, I know of the Mejnor account. It is a fascinating account, isn’t it? Perfect for a movie.”

“I think so,” Emil smiled slightly. “And I must say, I’m pleased you have heard of it. I thought it was a rather obscure tale. So, do you have any experience? Any parts in say, school plays or local
theatre?”

“My experience,” Michaela repeated. “All my life, experience. Many roles, whatever the situation needs.”

She stopped talking again, and stared into his face. For several moments, neither spoke. Emil waited for her to elaborate, to give examples or locations. None came, and he realized that she was forcing him to break the silence.

“Well, do you have any references? Do you have a resume?”

She reached out and gently but firmly picked up the script that he had laid on the table. “Why don’t I read a few lines for you now?” she asked.

Emil bristled, but tried to stay patient. “All right. Whenever you’re ready.”

She read several pages slowly, occasionally mouthing words to herself. Emil waited, hoping that she wouldn’t make him keep the interview going, such as it had been. Briefly, he wondered if the stranger was trying to play some kind of joke, but she hardly seemed like the joking type. Indeed, as he searched her face, he got the impression that here was a face that never smiled, unless it did so
scornfully. Maybe his hope had been premature; he certainly wouldn’t want to work with any type of diva.

Then, Michaela stood up and began to recite several of the lines that Frieda had written for Viola Pisani. Looking at Emil straight in the face, she made him sit up straight in his chair, demanding his attention with her presence. Her voice changed slightly, and took on not only the air of command, but a faint archaic accent that hinted at origins older and more sinister than anything that would usually be found in New York. This was the voice of old anger, of secret rites, of a necromancer.

Emil felt he had, for the first time, heard the voice of Inana in fact, and not in his own imagination.

Michaela stopped talking, and regarded him with quiet triumph. She could read the impression she had given on his face.

"So," she offered. "Do I have the part?"

"I…that was great," Emil confessed. "How did you know to play it so effectively?"

"As I said, I know the legend," she replied. "The cult of Nergal committed their murders and riots in the name of the ancient gods they worshipped. Nergal, god of the underworld, and Inana, goddess of war."

"Allegedly," Emil said. "My screen writer told me that her ancestors came from the area and that she heard the story as a child. I just learned about it through her. Evidently the people there still believe it. But there's no way to know for sure. It's an interesting story though. That's why I wanted to film it."

"Lady Viola Pisani was Inana," Michaela said. She smiled slightly. "Inana to the cult members at least. Their warrior queen, one who had lived for millennia, feeding off her own anger and fear that she would never triumph over the world as

she wanted to.”

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Michaela's gaze left Emil, and stared into space. She began speaking to herself, and seemed to forget the director's presence. "Yes. She lived long past her time. Seeing her own worship dwindle

while the Christian savior's grew. She saw him once, as he preached to the crowds. He paused long enough to look into her direction. Oh, the fear she felt! She knew she was in the presence of the real god, and ran, hiding herself for centuries, and emerging only to find that he had simply grown stronger. And her fear and hate grew stronger too, even more than her desire for power. Oh yes, she would fight harder than ever for her cult now!"

She stopped and looked at Emil again, who felt simultaneously confused and uncomfortable.

Michaela shrugged, and sat back down.

"That is the impression I get from the story," she explained. "That Pisani was Inana…within the cult… and that all they did was out of a desire for power and hatred of God. That is what I think about when I want to get into her character."

"That's an interesting interpretation," Emil managed. "I had never thought of it quite that way.

Still, I guess it fits."

"So, do I have the part?" she repeated.

"Well… the thing of it is, I have already signed a contract with another actress, who has had a successful career on Broadway. While I honestly think you did a better reading, I can't break it. Still, I definitely want to cast you in some way, even if I have to rewrite the script. Are there any references you may have?

"Do you think I need

them?” “Well, if you want

to get paid…”

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“I just want the experience,” Michaela interrupted. “I believe it will open up new opportunities for me. Let this be the beginning of my resume.”

Emil thought about it. She had been good, very good. However, while impressed with her acting, he found himself put off by her abrupt manner of speaking. And that speech, that tirade about Inana, where had that come from? To say it was strange and more than a little unnerving would be an understatement. Still…

“Tell you what,” Emil decided. “How about we shoot a few scenes tomorrow?”

He wrote a note on the script, giving her permission to come on the set should any one ask, and handed it back to her.

She took it, and stood again. Emil shook her hand as he too stood up to go. He still had to shoot some scenes with Frieda.

III

“Why do stories of the supernatural hold such power over us?” Frieda Vance addressed the camera. “Is it because it gives proof of life beyond? Perhaps. But perhaps it is more. Perhaps the
reason we gravitate to such things is that even in this age we desire magic. We desire a quick solution to all that plagues us. We want what I had, and that was the ability to control. I, Viola Pisani, I was the
necromancer. I was Inana.”

Kyle filmed as Emil watched. Of course, the film would be silent, but he wanted the lines to get his actors in character. To guide their body language as they acted out their parts. Indeed, Frieda’s stance had the air of menace as she

stood on the stairs of the castle set.

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“I was goddess in the Middle East. I learned to live forever, and to control both the living and the dead. I could call forth ghosts and call forth plague. None could oppose me. It was I who killed the ones who would learn too much of me.”

She stretched forth her arms and began acting at chanting in another language. He nodded his approval, wondering how much of the words he would be able to edit onto the dialogue cards that would serve to advance the narrative where action alone wouldn’t clearly convey what was happening.

The take ended, and she bowed. “How was that?”

“Very good,” Emil assured her. “However, I think I should tell you that I have another actress that I’m considering adding to the production. Not to replace you of course.”

She had begun to frown in surprise and dismay.

“But I think she can add to the production. Since you’re also helping on the script, I want you to stay while she reads a part.”

They heard footsteps, and the turned to see Michaela Stewart coming up to them. She had evidently been to the costume department already, for she was dressed all in black, and had a cloak draped about her head and shoulders. Kyle and Frieda took a voluntary step back, but Emil was already used to her, so wasn’t taken aback.

“Ah, Miss Stewart. Welcome,” Emil told her. “This is my cameraman Kyle Hunter, and my leading lady, Frieda Vance.”

She nodded at them, and then addressed her attention to Emil. “Are you ready for me to begin?” she asked.

“You have looked over the script?”

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“Of course.”

Again, that abrupt manner of speaking. Nevertheless, Emil positioned her where he wanted her to stand, and had Kyle begin filming.

She performed the same movements and actions that Frieda had done. And yet, there was something more to it. He could almost feel the menace of the woman, could almost feel the sickness creeping up upon him that the necromancer had supposedly been able to induce. He coughed suddenly, and felt warmth in his throat just then. Frowning, he put a hand to his head, and felt that his temperature was going up.

Wait, what was happening? Why would this feeling suddenly come? Was her acting that good? He looked over at Kyle and Frieda, and saw that they too were looking uncomfortable. He looked over his shoulder then, half expecting to see a shadow, some form that was causing them all to feel like they were being drained. But nothing could be seen, and in a moment, the feelings left them all.

After the take concluded, Kyle looked over at Emil. “Is it what you wanted?”

“I think so,” Emil said. “I probably won’t use everything, but I can still see what would fit.”

Michaela Stewart walked towards them, nodding her satisfaction. “I hope you can find a part for me,” she said. “I must go now, but I left my address with your secretary. We’ll be in touch, Mr.
Fowler.” Then, before they could reply,

she left. “What was that about?”

Frieda asked.

“I guess she really wanted to convince me she was right for the part,” Emil said. “It was strange, but we’ll just have to see what we can do. Do me a favor, and write in a part for another necromancer.”

“But there was only one in the legend,” she argued.

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“I know. But I don’t want to lose either one of you,” he replied. “So we may have to make changes in the story. It’s only natural; film and print are different media, so they can never be identical.”

“I could try,” Frieda said. “Or I could simply write myself as the role of Roger’s wife. We didn’t address that part, after all.”

“No, but remember we are on a budget. Oh, just do what you think best,” he said. “I’m at a loss right now.”

IV

“I don’t know Emil,” Kyle remarked.

It was midmorning the next day and his film crew was back on the set. Michaela had met them about an hour earlier, after being summoned by the studio secretary. She was still curtly speaking to everyone, and they all were getting put off by her. But they had given her a robe to wear for a costume anyway, and Kyle had filmed some test footage of her walking around the castle and standing over the ruined porch.

“You have to admit though, she looks the part,” Emil said.

“Sure,” Kyle agreed. “But the real test will be whether she can work with others.”

Emil waved Michaela over. “So we are going to have two necromancers in the story now. The first scene I would like to shoot will involve you moving into the castle. You will be conducting a ritual which we will follow up with the murder of a peasant, and then the farmers coming to the house like we did the other night. Okay everyone?”

“Very good,” Michaela said. “By the way, I have something that will add to the scene.”

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She walked off the set, and grabbed a box that she had brought with her to the shoot. Opening it up, she brought over six stone tablets. Incredibly ancient looking, they were covered with writing that he couldn't recognize. He glanced at Miss Stewart questioningly, and she smiled faintly.

"I had these props made for this particular scene," she told him. "I thought you would find that they add to the scene's menace."

They walked into the mock castle. In reality, there was only one empty room for shooting possible indoor scenes. Michaela put the tablets down on the floor. Arranging them in a circle, she began walking around them.

"If both I and Miss Vance could act as if we are chanting, calling forth the spirits that serve Nergal, you could add the scene to the overall picture," Michaela said.

"Yes, that isn't a bad idea," Emil conceded. "Alright everyone, places. And, action."

The two women walked around the tablets. While Frieda said gibberish, Michaela's performance was different entirely. She seemed to have thought out exactly what she was saying, so precise were her words. There was intensity, a focus, which somehow went beyond mere acting.

As the scene was being filmed, Frieda began to fidget noticeably. As she moved around Michaela, she kept looking up at her as if expecting her to lunge forward and attack. The other woman would glare at her, and she would flinch, and back down. Then, her hands trembled, and she stumbled badly.

"Cut!" Emil called out. He walked up to them. Michaela's lip twisted in scorn, and Frieda withered under her gaze.

“Is everything all right?” he asked. Because Frieda suddenly looked up, very ill at ease.

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“I…I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I don’t know what’s come over me.”

“You seem nervous,” Emil said. “Don’t worry, you were doing fine. Just take a deep breath and we’ll try again.”

She nodded, and swallowed nervously. Emil stood back and signaled for Kyle to get the camera ready again.

“Action!”

The actors once again began to chant around the tablets. Frieda stiffened again, and seemed to be fighting herself. Michaela fixed her gaze on Frieda, and she let off a strangled cry.

“I have to go!” she said.

“Cut!” Emil said again. Frieda quickly began to walk down the stairs toward the building.

“Hey! Where are you going?” Emil demanded, surprise, irritation and dismay churning in him at once.

“I’m sorry,” Frieda said, still walking quickly. “I can’t work today!” “What?! Why?”

“I…I,” She stopped and turned back towards the set. “I just don’t like it here. I’m leaving.” “Hey come on, just relax,” he said. “You come here all the time, remember? Besides, you already got paid, so…”

“I don’t care!” she yelped. “I’ll send the check back.” She ran for the door, and

slammed it behind her.

Emil walked back over to Kyle. “Hey is she all right?” the cameraman asked. “What happened?”

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“Panic attack, I guess. I don’t think she can work,” Emil told him. “What do you think? Did we get anything worth keeping?”

“Maybe. We can look at it later.”

“Okay. Tell you what. We’ll shoot some scenes with Michaela only, and go from there.”

Officer White walked down the street on patrol. Although the police didn’t normally travel here, near the movie studio, White had started making a point of coming out this way at least once a day since Emil Fowler had begun his documentary. Like other ageing members of the community, he did not exactly approve of the new motion picture industry. Sir Irving back in England notwithstanding, he and his like minded fellows considered actors to be low class. And with low class came vice, which in turn heralded crime.

As he passed the studio, he nearly ran into a frantic woman running out the front door.

Alarmed, he called out to her, but she only screamed and kept running. He quickly caught up with the woman, but she showed no signs of stopping. White yelled an order to stop, but the woman, Frieda Vance, paid him no heed.

Angered, the policeman quickly looked to make sure no one was coming the opposite way.

Then he sped up and tackled the actress. She screamed, and he stood,

pulling her to her feet. “I’m sorry,” he told her. “I’m Officer White.

What’s going on?”

The woman looked at him, cold terror in her face. With a quick glance

backwards, her mouth opened in another scream and she swooned in his arms. White was puzzled; there was nothing on the road behind him. Maybe she was on some kind of drug? He smelled no alcohol, but maybe something like opium? Who knew with these actor types?

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He picked her up, and carried began the long walk to a phone. He would call up the hospital, and have an ambulance pick her up. Then he would go back to the studio to see what on earth had happened.

Looking her over, he noticed something else. She was wearing a dark cloak that he figured was some kind of costume. Visible in one pocket was some papers. He pulled it out and found a typewritten script.

Emil, Michaela and Kyle were inside the set. Michaela, still in costume, was doing another take of walking around the room saying a mock chant. While his cameraman had initially been creeped out by the scene, Emil had honestly never felt anything amiss, unlike the other day. So he was trying to make up for his Frieda's breakdown by creating some new footage that they could play while a title card explained the history of the Mejnor Haunting.

Suddenly, the secretary came on set, with a nervous look on her face. "Sir," she told him, "There is a policeman here. He wants to talk to you."

"Cut," Emil said, directing the scene to finish. He supposed that he wasn't getting any more work done today. Not at this rate. Kyle walked over, but Michaela didn't follow him.

"Go get Michaela, Kyle," Emil said. "We'll continue tomorrow."

"Right." Wondering why she had stayed inside, Kyle went back into the set to get her. He then came out, looking worried.

"Emil…she's gone," Kyle said.

“Kyle, I’m not in the mood for jokes.”

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“I’m not joking! The set is empty.”

“And she was the one Miss Vance fought with?” the

secretary asked. “There wasn’t a fight,” Emil replied. “She

just seemed frightened of her.”

They walked back into the lobby, where they met a policeman. “I’m Officer White,” he announced when he saw them. “I’m looking for the people working on a picture called the Mejnor Hauntings.” He held up the script that he had found. “That would be you?”

“Yes officer. I’m Emil Fowler, director and co-writer.” He shook hands

with the officer. “You know a Frieda Vance, Mr. Fowler?”

“Yes. She is one of the leading ladies on my picture. Why, what happened?”

“She ran out of this building, screaming. Then she fainted. I called her for an ambulance to get her to a doctor.” His eyes narrowed. “As for the rest, I was hoping that you could fill me in.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not sure. We were filming a scene, when she seemed to have a sudden panic attack. She left before I could really do anything.”

“Why didn’t you follow her?”

“I…I didn’t know what to do,” Emil told him, chagrined. He realized now that he should’ve. But he was on a tight schedule, and told the policeman that.

“This picture you’re working on? Some kind of a horror story?”

White asked. “That’s right.”

“And could I see the set you’re working on?”

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“Yes, of course. This way.”

Emil showed Officer White the set containing the mock castle. White went inside while the others stayed outside. The set only had the one room and no back door. There was a small crawl space, but it was boarded up. The tablets had also been taken, Emil noted.

“All right,” White said when he came back out. “I want to see the footage you made of her. And then I think all of you should go home. No more filming today. But give me your contact information.”

Emil protested. “Sir, could we keep our footage? We’re behind as it is.”

“I don’t care about your movie,” White snapped. “If I had my say in it, you wouldn’t have been allowed to come out here in the first place. But yes, I only need to see what you did. You can keep the rest.”

Emil led him to their screening room. Honestly, he didn’t have the heart to keep filming anyway; it seemed too callous. Still, they did have a deadline of only a few weeks. White watched it, unimpressed, and the secretary supplied him with their official business cards.

As the images flashed across the screen, they saw Frieda and Michaela chanting over the tablets. When Michaela turned to the camera, Emil pointed to the image.

“That’s Michaela Stewart, the other star,” he told the policeman.

“Where is she?” he asked. “I would like to ask her a few

questions too.” “I’m not sure. She left after we finished

shooting.”

“I’m going to do a background check on her,” White told them. “Something’s not right here. In the meantime, if you see her, get in contact with me?”

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“Yes, officer.”

White left the office, and Emil thought silently to himself for

a moment. “So now what?” Kyle asked, breaking the silence

at last.

“I don’t know,” Emil confessed. “We have some material, but I think we need more. I’d better call Mr. Gilmore and let him know what’s going on.”

He had the secretary dial the number of their general manager. A middle

aged voice answered. “William Gilmore speaking.”

“Mr. Gilmore? Emil

Fowler.” “Ah yes. How’s

the filming?”

Emil swallowed. “Not so good, sir. One of our actresses, Frieda Vance, had a panic attack. She’s in the hospital now.”

“What? Why?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know. We were shooting here at the studio, when she just ran out. I will try to see her this evening, but it’s going to delay filming for at least a few days.”

“That’s terrible,” Gilmore said. “But look, don’t blame yourself.”

“The police came to question us,” Emil continued. “I’m not sure what to do now.”

Gilmore paused. “Look, try to stay calm,” he said kindly. “Maybe we can

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salvage something from the footage? If not, we'll just have to find another project for you. This is still a new business, so we need to cut our losses or move forward, whichever is best."

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“All right. Thank you, sir.”

V

Emil visited Frieda as soon as he could. To his surprise, he found that she had transferred from the psych unit to the quarantined rooms. Usually, they were reserved for people who had contracted tuberculosis.

It seemed that after the initial hysteria had died down, the actress had began coughing and having trouble breathing. While she hadn’t coughed up any blood yet, the hospital was taking no
chances. He had had to argue with the physician for several minutes before finally being allowed to visit her.

Wearing a mask and accompanied by a couple of nurses, Emil entered Frieda’s room. The actress had been changed into a hospital gown, and her hair hung loose about her head. Sweat bathed her forehead, and the nurses were applying cold water to her arms and face to try and cool her down.

Emil reflected ruefully on her condition, just as he felt surprise at the sudden onset. Before the last filming, she had been a healthy, witty, and energetic young lady, as fascinated by the old legends of Mejnor as he and excited over the chance of stardom. Unfortunately, while Emil was no scientist, he knew that doctors had just begun to learn the true causes of disease. They knew of germs and the need for sanitation, but still had little more than supportive care and patent medicine.

At least they’re not going to try to bleed her like they would have a century or two ago, he thought. Indeed, looking down at her face, it had grown pale, with a hint of green about the cheeks. Her eyes, however, were not only open but still

bright, and she smiled weakly when she recognized him.

“You look like a robber,” she rasped. “Is that the next project?”

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She still had her sense of humor. That was good; it meant the fit had passed. But where had that come from? And why had it apparently worked its way to a fever? True, the mind could affect the body, but somehow, not like this.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I feel like something’s sitting on my chest.” She coughed, and the nurses sat her up, pounded her back, and put a pillow behind her to keep her propped up. When the coughing stopped, she turned serious.

“I’m sorry, Emil. I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“It’s okay. We’ll figure it out,” he said. “What was it? I still don’t understand.”

“I don’t either. Just…I had this feeling of…of hate. Someone or something I couldn’t see… but hated me, and wanted to hurt me…”

She coughed again, and wiped her forehead. The sweat was making her hair stick to her scalp now. “I’ve never felt that before. I never want to again.”

She shook his head once again. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

He liked the young woman. Not romantically, although she was very pretty, almost beautiful. But the main thing about her was that he could talk to her about life and art and literature. Most other girls only cared for gossip, while most other men only cared for politics and sports. Frieda had said that she had found the same thing in her dealings with people.

He remembered a newspaper column that she had shown him. A letter to the editor that explained why it was she chose to be an actress as opposed to a more ‘traditional’ occupation:

There are four subjects that seek to explain the world. They are science, philosophy, religion, and art. Science relies on experience first, followed by reason, and perhaps even some faith. In particular, it relies on the experiences of observation and repeated experiment. Philosophy relies on reason first, followed by experience and faith. It seeks to examine the mind itself, whence it comes, how it acquires knowledge, and whether said knowledge is an accurate picture of the external world. Religion relies on faith, followed by reason and experience. These three subjects all need to be studied in order to get a clear and complete worldview. Faith, reason, and experience are neither the same thing nor are they contradictory things. They must be embraced in a complementary manner in order to arrive at truth.

Art has the power to connect all three, and to explain them in a way that makes them accessible to the common man. While many will turn away at the mention of a lecture, sermon or discourse, through story, much can be taught. The best stories will not merely entertain, but will transport to other worlds, enlighten without patronizing or preaching, and uplift without resorting to cloying. This is why I am an actress. This is how I will touch the world.

He knew then that he had made the acquaintance of a remarkable woman indeed. “Maybe…you could let my family know I’m here,” she answered.

“Are they in town?”

“Yes. Their address is in my admission papers.”

She looked down and grew sad. “I haven’t talked to them in years. Papa never liked me being an actress. He thought they were all immoral and low class.

We argued, and I told him I didn’t want to be some schoolmarm or governess.

Much less a nun. Those seem to be the only ‘respectable’ jobs for girls, you know.”

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She looked away for a moment. “Kyle came over earlier. You know about us, I’m sure.

Thought I’d marry him, but it didn’t work out. My family was furious.”

She looked at him. “It was wrong, but should it keep me away from them

forever? Tell me.” “I…I don’t think so,” he said. He found such conduct

sinful himself. Still, shouldn’t people also

have a second chance when they did come to their senses? Why did people approach sins as if they were either unforgiveable or not sins at all? He supposed it was just easier for most people. Again, most people didn’t think deeply.

“Of course you don’t think so,” she sighed. “But my father. If only I could just talk to them.

Maybe now that I’m sick, they would listen.”

“You’re not on your deathbed,” Emil said with a nervous laugh. “No need for the dramatic when there’s no camera.”

She laughed too, and leaned back in her pillows. “Do let them know

I’m here, Emil.” “All right, Frieda, all right,” he promised. “I’ll get the

address and head right over.”

Emil walked down a street in the Bronx to a neighborhood that contained a few larger town houses. Stopping at one, he knocked on the door and was greeted by a middle aged woman. She had pale skin and eyes, and while she seemed gentle, there was also slight fear and suspicion in her eyes.

“Yes? What is it?” she asked.

“I’m Emil Fowler,” he began. “I’m a director at Edison Studios. Frieda Vance is working with me on a project there. She’s been hurt, and wanted me to convey it to you. May we speak for a moment?”

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The women looked over her shoulder. “Franklin!” she called. “Come here please.”

“Yeah, Vivian?” a voice answered. Shortly, a man walked up behind her. He was a large, powerfully built man with dark hair and piercing black eyes that reminded Emil of Frieda.

The man put a protective arm around his wife while she explained who Emil was.

“Look,” he said. “I don’t want to be rude, but I’ve told other people we don’t grant interviews. I never wanted Frieda to go into that line of work, but she did anyway. I’m sorry for her, and hope she’ll be alright, but we don’t support her profession.”

“She should be,” Emil assured them. “But I don’t understand; what do you find wrong with actors?”

“They’re an immoral lot. Frieda’s done some things herself that we’re not proud of. We pray for her every day that she’ll come home, and now this. What did you say happened?”

“Nervous breakdown,” he replied. He didn’t bring up the mysterious Michaela Stewart, as he didn’t know what to think of her anyway. “Look, can I come in? Maybe we can talk more.”

“No. My mother lives with us, and is asleep now,” Franklin replied, a little rougher this time. “She’s suffering from throat cancer and not expected to live much longer. All right? Good day.”

He shut the door, leaving Emil standing on the porch both embarrassed and intimidated.

“Sorry,” he called to the door, and walked back to the car. He sat down and sighed. Great, now what? Back to the studio, he supposed. Then go from there.

He started walking away and looked at the house one more time. To his surprise, he thought he saw a face looking at him through a curtain covering a window on the first floor. It was an old wizened

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face that ducked behind a curtain before he could get a good look at it though. Whoever it was, though, it definitely wasn't either of Frieda's parents.

That evening he checked back with Kyle. He had put together the footage that they had managed to shot only to find that it was an hour long and only had two full scenes with the actresses.

"Can't be helped, really," Kyle said. "Given Frieda's breakdown, and the other actress apparently quitting."

"She's not called or come by?"

Emil asked. "No."

"Great," he grumbled. "I don't even know if I should use the footage now."

"She signed the paperwork the morning we started," Kyle said. "Why couldn't we?"

"First, she hasn't been paid. Second, what if she's in trouble with the police? She did sneak out when the cop arrived."

"Probably because she could hear the cop was looking for someone to blame." Kyle shook his head. "I don't know. She was odd, that's for sure. Maybe we ought to edit her back out so there's no reason for to come back and demand a paycheck."

"Maybe, but she said she wasn't really interested in money," Emil said. "Tell you what; put the battle scene at the end, and a few note cards at the beginning."

He shook his head. "I hope Frieda's all right. If only her parents had talked to me more."

Just then, there was a knock at the office door. Surprised, Emil opened it to see a young woman standing there. She was about their age, and had curly brown hair framing a beautiful, sweet face.

Before she even spoke, Emil knew she was related to Frieda by her dark eyes.

“Good afternoon,” she said nervously. “I’m looking for Emil Fowler? I asked around and…” “Yes, that’s me,” he said, holding out his hand. “And you are?”

“Jennifer Vance,” she replied, shaking his hand. “Call me Jen. I’m Frieda’s younger sister.”

She looked at Kyle, who flinched. “Hi, Jen. You’ve grown since I last saw you,” he said awkwardly.

“Okay, Jen. What do you need?” Fowler asked.

She looked over her shoulder to make sure no one else was in the hall. Behind them, there were a few janitors and late workers, but they were otherwise alone.

“My grandma, Meredith, saw you this afternoon,” Jen explained, and Emil remembered the face in the window.

“She wanted to see if you could come by and talk with her.” “Would I ever,” Emil answered, noticeably brightening.

“Wait,” Jen said. “You have to come alone, tomorrow morning after my parents are at work.

They still wouldn’t want her to talk.”

“Okay,” Emil said slowly. “I can be there tomorrow morning then.”

“Thank you. I’ll be there since I promised mom and dad I’d watch grandma,” Jen replied. “See you then.”

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Without another word, she left.

“Any idea what this is all about?”

Kyle asked. “I’ll find out soon

enough.”

VI

The next day, Emil pulled back up to the Vance’s home and knocked on the door. Jen answered and let him in. As he walked in, he found himself wishing that he had been allowed his camera.

However, the house appeared ordinary, albeit somewhat old fashioned in its furnishings.

Jen led him into the living room, and told him to sit on the sofa. “I need to get grandma,” she said. “She can’t talk anymore, so she’ll write her words.” She pointed to a note book resting on the coffee table in front of the couch. A love seat was positioned perpendicular to the couch so Emil assumed that’s where Mrs. Vance would sit.

Jen left the room and moments later returned with a very old and very frail woman leaning on her. The woman’s face was clearly the one that he had seen earlier. Deeply lined and with a bandaged

throat, Ms. Vance’s hair was completely white, and pulled back in a tight bun, as if to emphasize her face and its advanced age. But her eyes were perfectly clear, and the exact same shade of black as her son’s and granddaughter’s. Briefly, Emil wondered who the eyes belonged to originally. What mutual ancestor was it who stared out of all his or her descendants with those eyes?

Jen gently lowered Meredith Vance into her seat and put the notebook at her fingertips.

“Grandma, this is Emil Fowler,” Jen told her. “The one making the movie about the Mejnor Haunting.”

“Hello, Mrs. Vance,” Emil said. “Thank you for agreeing to see me.”

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Meredith looked at him for a long moment. She searched his face intently, and Emil smiled sheepishly. Then she wrote a few sentences in the notebook before passing it to him.

Hello, Mr. Fowler it said. I saw you through the window and wanted to speak with you. Tell me, why are you making this movie now?

"I wanted to learn the truth about what happened," Emil said. "Your granddaughter told me about the story, and it intrigued me. I also thought it would make an exciting movie."

He paused and weighed his next words carefully. He had thought about what he wanted to say and ask for hours last night. How could he get her to open up about the events of the past?

Do you think that the writers of this world are interested in truth? Meredith wrote. Is that the

type of work you want to do? You don't think they simply exaggerate and sensationalize events to make them more marketable?

"William Gilmore is a respected businessman," Derek said. "So yes ma'am, I do. You have a point though."

He licked his lips nervously. "Frieda wrote the screenplay because she said that her family was related to the de Beaumonts who figure into the story. She showed me old immigration papers of a Roger, Constance, Jean and Ruth Beaumont to prove it. She was interested in the story as well, but now she's suffered a breakdown for some reason. She's getting sicker. I know it sounds crazy but… does it have anything to do with this story?"

Meredith looked down, and her face was unreadable. Then she began to

write again. Ruth was my grandmother. She told me the story when I was young, and I have kept it alive with my own children and grandchildren.

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“I promise you, I won’t portray your family in a disrespectful light,” Emil said.

Remember, with this and with any other story you cover, these were people, she continued through the notebook. If this project of yours has merit, it will honor God and help warn and protect others from the evil in this world.

“Mrs. Vance, is the popular account accurate?” Emil asked.

It didn’t get anything wrong, but it doesn’t tell everything. There’s always more to the story. “Such as?”

Meredith paused again. She trembled slightly, and Jen put a hand on her shoulder. Meredith then reached around her neck, and pulled out a simple wooden cross that hung around an equally simple chain.

This is the cross of Roland De Beaumont,

Meredith wrote. “Was he a saint?” Emil asked.

Yes, although not officially canonized, Meredith wrote. What is a saint but someone who hears and obeys God? My grandmother received it from him, and it’s come down to me. It is protection from the evil forces that haunted Mejnor. The necromancer and her demon master. I believe they still are, and will continue to spread their evil when the opportunity comes.

This is what I wanted to tell you. What I want you to know, even if you don’t put it in the movie.

The reason we lived was because of God. The reason we have life after death is because of his Son. If you need any help, you must let me know.

“Thank you. But please, is there anything else you can tell me?” Emil asked. While grateful to Mrs. Vance for seeing him, he felt that he had learned very little. All she had really done was provide some confirmation and tell him that she owned an old cross from the time period.

Just come if you need me. You will know if you do. Until then, I will pray for you.

She stopped writing and closed the notebook. The interview, such as it had been, was over.

Meredith rose up, shook his hand, and directed Jen to take her

back to her room. The young woman returned a minute

later, and led Emil to the front door.

“Thank you for having me,” Emil told Jen before he went to his car. “But tell me please, isn’t there anything else your grandmother ever told you?”

Jen shook her head. “She never liked to talk about it. Neither do mom and dad. About the only thing she ever said to me was that our ancestors should have died in France but that they were spared. Every day since grandma has seen as a bonus.”

“Nothing else?”

Jen bit her lip and looked back inside. “Lately, grandma says she doesn’t have a lot of time left,”

She admitted. It upsets us. But she does add that she has one more thing to do before she’s with grandpa. She won’t say what, though.”

She shook his hand, and nodded to him. “Nice meeting

you, Emil.” “Goodbye, Jen,” he replied.

VII

“Frieda? Is that you?”

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Franklin and Vivian Vance came into the dimly lit hospital room. When the actress looked over, her mother gasped. Since Emil had left, she had only weakened further. Her breaths were shallow, her skin had turned ashen, and her eyes were glazed.

She looked over and despite blurred vision, recognized her parents. She smiled feebly, and held up a hand.

Her mother, with a sob, ran over and took it. Not caring about the potential of contagion, she covered both it and her daughter's forehead with her kisses. Franklin had followed but held back. He had been prepared to berate her once again for her bad choices, to remind her that she had been brought up with values and to ask her what possible pleasures had been worth forsaking her soul over.

Yet now, with the reality in front of him, he only saw a daughter, a frightened sick child who needed him.

"Papa?" she asked, barely above a whisper.

He took Frieda's other hand gently. "Yes. I'm

here," he said. He knelt down beside her. "Can

we pray?"

Frieda nodded, and he prayed silently for them both. Asking God to forgive her waywardness, and his harshness. He couldn't speak aloud, for fear that he'd break down. He only hoped she'd understand.

Suddenly, he became aware of a coldness creeping up her hand. He opened his eyes. Frieda's were closed, and her breath had stopped.

“Frieda?” he asked uncertainly. “Child?”

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“Doctor!” Vivian cried, leaping up and immediately seeing the truth. Tears welled in her eyes as she ran out into the hall. Looking in both directions, she continued to cry out for the doctor.

Then she shrieked.

“Frank! Frank! Come here!”

Franklin ran to his wife’s side, and gasped. There, in the hall, was a dark shadow. It looked like a man walking away from them, but no clear features could be seen. Then it slowly faded away, leaving the frightened and distraught parents with their dead.

The day of Frieda Vance’s funeral was warm and sunny, mocking the anguish of the mourners.

The actress’ parents and sister were inconsolable, sobbing and expressing remorse at the broken relationship, now never to be fully repaired. Kyle and Emil were there too, mourning the loss of a friend and not knowing what to do next. Jen clung to Emil, to his discomfort. He could only hold her in silence, and resolved to find out the truth of what had happened to his leading lady. No matter what.

The rented car, courtesy of the studio, returned the family to their home. Franklin and Vivian went to their room, the mother continuing to sob while the father tried in vain to comfort her.

Meredith sat on her couch while Jen and Emil sat opposite her. The girl rested her head on his shoulder, and sniffled. He resisted the urge to kiss her head or put her arm around her, not feeling it to be

appropriate. Indeed, he didn’t know what to do period. Kyle sat next to the old

woman awkwardly. “Why?” she finally asked. “Why did she have to die?”

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He didn't answer, having none. Meredith wrote some notes down, and passed the notebook to them. It said that evil was permitted due to free will and for testing faith. It emphasized, however, that explanation wasn't explaining away, and that grief was normal.

"You don't seem as affected," she told her grandmother, almost accusingly.

Meredith wrote down another passage. I am, but I suppose I will see her the soonest.

Whatever weaknesses she had, Frieda is forgiven. I know it.

"Why do you have to speak that way?" Jen demanded, her voice breaking again.

You must not avoid facing the unpleasant. I've known pain, I have lived long. Only by facing the truth can we avoid being deceived. The one who only believes what they feel is happy or pleasant will never know anything.

"I don't want to face anything, I just…" she broke off, and buried her face in Emil's shoulder again. Meredith stood, patted her granddaughter's shoulder, and then wrote one more thing down. Jen didn't read it, but Emil did.

We are not yet at the end of things. One day, all accounts will be settled. Justice and judgment will yet be meted out by God. Serve him because He Is, not because of how He makes you feel.

The next day, Officer White visited Emil at the studio. The policeman led him back to his office.

While some of his initial hostility had cooled, he nevertheless looked on the filmmaker with mistrust.

“Look, I don’t think it’s any secret that I don’t like your production,” he began. “But you need to see it my way. One person is dead, and another is missing. All of your problems you yourself said began when you hired the necromancer stand in. I need to know everything you do.”

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“Yes sir, but I’ve been honest,” Emil insisted. “I swear I never saw her before and she hasn’t been back since.”

“I’ll ask you again Mr. Fowler,” White said. “Are you certain you’ve had no contact with her?

Right now, she’s my only suspect in Frieda Vance’s death.”

“No officer,” he insisted. “The only scenes I got to shoot were the few takes we did before Frieda’s panic attack. As it is, if I keep trying to make something of this, those shots and some stock footage will have to be most of it after all.”

“Right now, I think you should just forget about the documentary,” White replied. “There’s something wrong with this whole business. One woman is dead. And as for the other. We tried to look into Miss Stewart’s background. There’s no trace of her anywhere. I’m not superstitious, but it seems almost cursed.”

He sighed. “I’ll put out an advertisement in the papers, and have other police looking for her.

She couldn’t have gotten far. But under no circumstances will you put yourself in danger. Call the filming off until I have Michaela Stewart in custody.”

“But Mr. Gilmore…”

“I’ll call Mr. Gilmore and explain the situation myself. All right?”

Emil’s face fell. Just like that, he felt his chance for a head start in the film industry all but dashed. It had been going so smoothly until a few days ago. Now, however, he wondered if another chance would even come. Yes, he felt sad for Frieda and her family, but he still had his own future to think about. And what about what he had told them about finding the truth?

“Yes sir,” he sighed, standing up and taking the keys. He wondered how his

boss would take it.

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Later that day, Emil was engaged in one of his least favorite activities. To get his mind off of things, he decided to catch up on some housework. He was standing on top of a ladder, scooping debris out of the gutters over his porch. A series of storms over the last few months had clogged them up to the point where rain water could no longer drain out, and so he was trying to unclog them.

Scooping leaves out and throwing them to the ground, Emil grimaced as he looked down. He had always hated ladders. While mountains and skyscrapers had never made him feel unsafe, a ladder felt rickety and unstable no matter how strong or level it might be. He could usually only stand a few feet above the ground on one, and then he would literally freeze with fear.

Still, it needed to be done. He just hoped that it would be over soon. There was a slight breeze blowing, and he feared another storm would soon come.

As if it could read his thoughts, the wind picked up. A gust of air blew audibly, and shook the ladder. He instinctively grabbed onto the gutter, and tried to steady himself. Why did it have to blow now?

Suddenly, he heard strange shuffling sound underneath him. Emil looked down and saw a large, dark, hairy shape at the foot of the ladder. While he couldn't see it very well, it looked like some kind of dog. Where it had come from, he couldn't say, and he had no idea who it belonged to either. He wasn't much of an animal person, and he disliked most dogs because he found them hostile towards strangers.

Then, it looked at him. If look was the right word. The thing had no head. No

eyes or nose as far as he could tell. But there was a mouth and row of sharp teeth where the base of the neck should be.

The thing growled, baring its fangs at him, and giving him the impression that it would like nothing better than to sink them into his hide.

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Emil felt a tightness in his chest. It was as if something was sitting on him, and knocking all the breath out of him. He would have screamed, but didn't have the breath to do so.

The wind picked up, and the ladder actually moved under him. Emil let out a panicked cry and grabbed even more tightly onto the gutter. The thing kept barking and growling at him, and Emil wondered how he would get away from it. He looked around to see if there was anyone else around, anyone who could scare the thing away. He saw no one, and thought about trying to get up on the roof of the porch. Maybe, he could get into his house via a second story window and call the police.

Warily, he took a step up the ladder. Now his head was over the gutter, and he could see into a window. But then, the wind blew harder, stinging his face with icy invisible fingers. Emil staggered, and the thing lunged up.

Fortunately, it wasn't strong enough to leap up and bite him, but it did hit the ladder hard. Emil jumped involuntarily and the ladder fell out from under him. He grabbed at the railing as the ladder fell down. The creature jumped out of the way, but continued to bark and growl at him.

The wind kept blowing, the monster kept snarling and the tightness in his chest kept getting worse. Emil finally managed to cry out for help, but none came. Finally, just when it seemed like he couldn't get any more frightened, the gutter broke.

Almost by a miracle, he managed to leap into a window before the gutter collapsed. He fell on the floor, stunned but unhurt. He heard the thing snarl in rage, and run up to his front door. He heard pawing and scratching, and knew it wasn't going to go away. He had to do something.

He looked around and saw that he was in his bedroom. He ran into another room, his study. In a cabinet, there were rifles. He liked to go upstate to hunt when he went on vacation. He hadn't imagined that he would ever do so in town, however.

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He pulled out a rifle, and went back to the upstairs window. But when he looked out, the thing was gone. He frowned, and looked up and down the street. He saw a few passersby, but no sign of the thing. It seemed to have run off as soon as there were possible witnesses.

Shaking, he walked down his stairs to the front door, still holding the rifle. He looked out the window, still searching for signs of the creature. Then he opened his door. There were tell tale scratch marks, but that was the only proof that something was ever there.

IX

Emil called the police, and reported the incident. An officer, not White, came over and looked at the door. While he could clearly see the scratches, and assured him that he would inform animal
control, he didn't believe Emil's account of the thing having no head. He assumed that the young filmmaker had been too frightened to clearly tell what was happening, and that what had attacked him had been a feral dog.

His circumstances only went from bad to worse. The next day, he had checked in at the studio and had a message from Mr. Gilmore. While disappointed, his superior agreed with the police about holding the shooting schedule until the mystery behind its lead actress could be solved.

After assurances that he would be given extended time to film another project given the circumstances, Emil had left the office. He wandered the grounds of the studio, completely discouraged and wondering what to do next. How would he explain all this to Kyle? And what about poor Frieda?

He sat down on a bench and looked up at the sky. It was overcast, and

looked as somber as he felt. He wondered if he should go back inside. His chest felt heavy, and he figured that a cold would be all he'd need right now.

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He heard a footstep and looked up. His eyes widened, and he jumped off the bench. There was Michaela Stewart.

Where had she come from? For that matter, where had she been? He certainly didn't know, but now felt more than a little unease at her appearance. Was she dangerous? Or simply insane?

"Having trouble?" she asked, a mocking smile slowly appearing on her lips.

"Where have you been?" Emil asked. "After the accident, you simply

vanished. Why?" "It wasn't the right time yet."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Is the movie finished?" she countered, ignoring the question. "Have you found what you were looking for yet?"

"Frieda Vance is dead, and you kept away until now. What do you know about all that?"

His eyes looked her over, wondering if she were carrying a concealed weapon after all. Given what had happened, he had no idea what to expect from her.

"I know a lot of things," she smiled. "I'm Inana, remember?"

"Or maybe you're Michaela Stewart, someone no one has ever heard of before now. Who are you, really?" Emil snapped, sounding braver than he felt.

She stood her ground, and looked him straight in the eye. He flinched under her gaze, and he felt the tightness in his chest increasing. His head swam and he felt his knees buckling. His mind began to wander, and he found himself thinking about the original story about Mejnor. The one that had

noted sicknesses and several paranormal occurrences happening before the de Beaumonts had intervened.

“Who are you?” he asked again. “What are you?”

He frowned at himself. Why would he ask that? It had just come unbidden.

His head grew foggy, and he felt faint. Before he realized it, he was sitting back down on the bench. Michaela meanwhile, turned and began to walk away without another word. He watched, dazed, as Michaela walked down the sidewalk and then turned and went behind a building.

When she was out of sight, Emil’s head and throat slowly cleared, and the tight feeling left his chest. He stood, and ran after her. Rounding a corner, he saw that she had vanished. Emil blinked.
How had she managed that trick? Then he noticed something on the ground. A rumpled piece of paper. Picking it up, he saw a hastily scrawled address on it. Had it been dropped by Michaela? What was she doing to him? And why?

One thing seemed clear, however. She was hiding something and intended to reveal it to him. He felt he needed to call Officer White and tell him what had happened. Yet, at the same time, he felt obligated to do something himself. He felt the need to try and help Frieda’s family by finding out what led to their daughter’s death.

Slowly coming to a decision, he went back inside the studio to use the phone.

“You didn’t call the police?” Kyle asked in disbelief. “Why would you do that?”

They were walking to a small park called Willoughby. According to the map, that was all that was at the address. The sun was going down, so he had his cameraman accompanying him, in case anything happened.

“Officer White is going to be furious,” Kyle continued, when Emil didn’t reply. “He doesn’t like us to begin with. Then he’ll say he could’ve tracked her down if you had called him earlier.”

“No, like I said, she was already gone,” Emil said.

“That doesn’t make any sense. Nor does that tightness feeling you said slowed you down. If she’s really some lunatic like White thinks, then why all that?”

They looked ahead. A sign for Willoughby State Park pointed to a road off of the main street.

Kyle reluctantly turned and followed Emil in. He hadn’t wanted to come when Emil called and explained what had happened over the last day. But the director had insisted that they should do something, so here they were.

They walked past the main gate and into the parking lot. Behind it was an open field with a playground and picnic shelter. Some trails went off into the trees beyond the clearing. No one else was present, but the day was clear and with Kyle with him, Emil didn’t think he’d be in any danger, assuming Michaela was even out here.

They looked at each other warily. “What are we looking for

exactly?” Kyle asked. “Wish I knew.”

Kyle sighed. “Bad idea,” he muttered. But he helped Emil search the picnic pavilion. They saw nothing that didn’t look like it could be found in any other

park. An examination of the field turned up nothing either.

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They looked at the largest trail leading to the back of the park. “Do you want to go down one of these?” Emil asked.

“Do I want to?” Kyle repeated, not without sarcasm.

They slowly walked towards one, and began to travel down it. After several minutes, they lost sight of the shelter. The sky over head was still clear, the sun was going down, and there wasn’t a sound apart from their footsteps.

Then, they heard a growl. Emil jumped, and looked off to the side of the path. There was a fallen tree about fifty feet back, and he could’ve sworn that that’s where the sound came from.

He heard the growl again, and Kyle looked

nervous. “Hello?” Emil called out. “Who’s

there?”

There was no answer. It started again. “Let’s get out of here,” Kyle told him, looking nervously at the spot

Emil nodded, remembering the attack from earlier. There was nothing to be found here, and he had a sneaking suspicion as to why he had been led here. Then, a dark shape glided from behind a tree, and his fears were confirmed.

Emil and Kyle screamed in unison, and ran quickly back to the trail. All thoughts of investigation were over; for they had found something that they had wished they could unsee. That thing, that

headless thing…no, better not to think about it. Just get out of there.

An invisible force tripped them up, and they stumbled and fell. Emil felt his

movements grow sluggish and his chest felt tight once again. Then, he heard footsteps rustling the leaves behind him.

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Emil couldn't get up, but he could move. However, any thought of looking back was pushed out of his mind by the fear. No. not that, he thought. It couldn't be that.

"Oh God, what's happening?" Kyle shouted from his side. "Help us! Anyone! Help!"

Meredith Vance rested on her bed while Jen sat next to her, reading. Meredith snored lightly and her breathing sounded clear, so Jen hoped that her grandmother would have a decent day. Some days were better than others, and there had already been several that she feared would be her last.

She really should be in school, or finding a husband or travelling or doing any of the things that young people did to establish their adult lives. Instead, she had volunteered to watch after her grandmother so her parents wouldn't have had to either miss work or put her in a nursing home.

Jen sighed, and bit her lip as she looked on her dozing grandmother. She hated having to do this on one level, but Meredith was her last living grandparent. So many mixed feelings and emotions went through Jen's mind. She didn't want to lose her grandmother, of course, but didn't want her to live like this either, unable to get out or enjoy anything. She treasured all the old memories of her grandmother, but didn't want them to end this way. They were Christians, and believed in a better would beyond this one, yet still had fear as this world, horrors notwithstanding, was the one they knew.

When she could still speak, Meredith told her that faith was hope in things unseen. Jen supposed she believed that, but it didn't make it any easier watching

her grandma die. Especially so soon after her sister.

Have faith, she thought. Grandma has witnessed more death than I and she still believes. The older Mrs. Vance stirred and her eyes opened.

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“I’m sorry, grandma,” Jen said. “Did I wake you?”

Meredith shook her head vigorously and motioned for her to be quiet. Clutching the cross at her neck, she bowed her head. She could no longer speak but her lips moved in a hastily recited prayer.

Behind Emil and Kyle, the footsteps stopped, and he felt life coming back into his frozen limbs.

His heart began beating more slowly, and the heaviness left his chest. Although still frightened, the overwhelming panic that had crippled him was leaving.

He slowly stood, and looked at Kyle. Kyle was standing too, and they both quickly looked over their shoulders. The path was empty, but they had no doubt that their grisly pursuer still remained behind the log.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” Kyle said, running down the path to the entrance. Emil followed, and held the phone to his ear.

Meredith stopped praying, and picked up her notebook. After writing a few sentences, she handed it to Jen. Her grandmother indicated that she should read, so she did.

I dreamed that the filmmakers were in danger. I prayed for their safety. You have to get them to come here immediately.

Inana lives.

X

The night watchman made his rounds through the studio. Outside, the temperature had dropped off but inside it was warm and reasonably well lit due to the fact that it had electricity in a time before everyone automatically did. Being owned by Edison did have its advantages.

He heard a shuffling and saw the whisper of cloth

turning a corner. “Hey! Anyone there?” he called out.

Footsteps answered him. Footsteps running for the door. He pulled his nightstick out of his belt, and chased the sounds of the retreating figure.

As he rounded the corner, he saw the flicker of light. He looked in the room on his left and swore. It was a storage room for film reels. In the middle of the floor, several reels had been tossed onto a pile of rags and set on fire. He quickly turned back around to call the fire department.

Answering a summons, Emil and Kyle returned to the Vance home. When they knocked, Franklin answered the door. His eyes met Kyle’s, and the younger man looked down, but he pulled them both in. The past apparently was the past for him now.

“You’ve come. Good.”

“Yes, Mr. Vance. What is it?” Emil asked.

“My mother has been writing all day,” he explained, letting them in. “She had a dream that Inana tried to kill you. And that she’ll try to kill all of us tonight.”

They went in, where they were greeted by Jen, Vivian, and Meredith. Franklin handed them some guns, and asked them if they knew how to shoot.

“Good,” he said, when they answered in the affirmative. “If she’s right, now may be the time when we can end her.”

For an hour, they waited by the window, tensing up with every passing moment. Behind them, the women huddled around a gaslight. Not a sound could be heard, save for the clock slowly ticking down the hour.

Then the clock struck on the hour. Emil glanced over his shoulder for just a moment to look at it. Then it happened.

The door exploded, sending wood splinters and pieces everywhere. The men cried out as pieces cut them. Frantically, they pointed their weapons out the hole, looking for something to shoot.

But no further challenge could be seen, and the men were confused. Inana, the necromancer, the servant of Nergal, lurked outside somewhere. But where?

The light began to dim, and Emil felt a sinus headache coming on. No. Not here. Not now. He coughed, and shook his head to clear it. He still looked for something to shoot, but remembered that many of the necromancer’s servants were spiritual rather than physical.

A robed figure walked down the walkway. The necromancer had come to finish what she began days ago. She had seen in the papers that some young fool was making a movie on her past history, and had set out to stop it. At all costs, her actions must remain secret. No one must know her existence and true intentions until Nergal came.

She also found an opportunity to destroy another line of Ninshabar's family. True, this branch didn't possess the seventh tablet, but they did, she believed, have the cross of Roland de Beaumont. If they didn't know how to wield it, then she could end their lives, and the cross would pass out of her enemies' possession. Never again need she fear the talisman of the Ageless God.

Emil managed to get off a shot. But his head was swimming so badly that it went wide, and Inana continued her approach. She pushed aside the gunner, and they continued to hack and cough. She looked ahead, and saw that the women were being affected in the same way.

Except for Meredith.

Not only did she gaze upon their family's ancient enemy lucidly and without fear, but she held the cross in her hands.

Inana's eyes widened at the sight. Meredith smiled, and made a dry hacking sound. The necromancer realized that it was the other woman's laughter.

Meredith Vance stood, and brandished the cross. Inana screamed, and grabbed her head. Mil and the others felt their throats and vision clearing as Inana backed away. Meredith slowly stepped forward, and Inana seemed to weaken just as they grew stronger.

She tried to run out the door, but Emil blocked it. He shot her in the shoulder, and she shrieked, grasping it. He aimed again, but found to his dismay that he was out of bullets. He swung his gun like a club, but Inana batted it away and aimed a kick at Emil's stomach, sending him sprawling.

Meredith mouthed the prayer that seemed to activate the cross' power.

Inana grabbed her head, and staggered away. She looked around frantically, and saw the door to the basement door open. She ran and dove for it just as Franklin tried to shoot at her again. They went to the door, but Franklin held them back.

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“Don’t,” he told them. “There’s no way out, except a small manhole. We have her now.”

Emil stood, and joined them. He couldn’t believe it. Would it be that easy? He tried to peer down the rickety steps, but could see nothing in the darkness.

But he heard sounds.

As Meredith tried to use the cross once again, they all heard creaking and groaning of beams. Ugly sounds issued from the walls, causing the group to look around nervously. Emil had a bad feeling. A feeling that was confirmed when plaster began to fall from the ceiling, and cracks appeared in the walls.

The basement of the town house had several load bearing wooden beams. Either by her telekinesis or her own natural strength, far exceeding that of a modern human, Inana was smashing through them. From down below, a crash and splintering sound greeted their ears, and more cracks appeared.

“Run!” Emil shouted.

The group made for the front door. A large piece of plaster broke away and headed for Meredith, but Emil grabbed her, and pulled her out of the way. The old woman cried out in pain, but Emil flung her over his shoulder and ran out with them. Behind him, the ceiling kept falling in pieces and the sound of smashing wood was accompanied by the angry shrieks of Inana.

He crossed the threshold of the front door and ran out into the street. From the safe vantage point, he set Meredith down, and then looked at the house. Meredith, Franklin, Vivian, Jen, Kyle, and Emil all watched as the house crumbled and collapsed in a loud crash of brick, wood and dust. In an instant, the Vance family had lost everything. Everything but the cross, their lives, and their resolve.

The next day, Emil and Kyle had returned to the studio. There, they found out that there had been a fire destroying all but one reel of the Mejnor Hauntings. They had been dismayed, but had wanted to go ahead and release it. He felt that people deserved to know the truth. That evil forces existed and that they did work their evil whenever they could.

But William Gilmore himself had shut down the production. Convinced that the movie was

cursed, he hadn't even wanted to keep the remaining copy in the vaults. So Emil had passed it on to the Vances. It provided a poor memorial for Frieda, but served as evidence of the necromancer's strength. And her weakness.

The police were going through the rubble, and taking statements from the Vances now. They had found piles of hair and slime that they couldn't identify, but no human body in the basement wreckage. They were also trying to salvage whatever possessions they could from the ruined home.

Kyle and Emil headed for the police station. They would have to make their statements as well. He felt bad for the family, and hoped that he could help them rebuild. He had promised them that he would render them any aid he could.

He had also promised them that he would help them find the other branch of their family, the Beaumonts. While it was not what they normally did, they had to know that the necromancer lived, and would be seeking the seventh tablet.

Children of Enki

Prologue

It was a cool March morning in upstate New York as a lone car turned off the highway to travel the back roads. The two passengers, a young man and a young woman, were headed for Niagara Falls in hopes of having a romantic getaway from the busy city and college life. While many of their peers opted to head south, this couple thought they had a better way to spend spring break.

“Do you know where you’re going?” the woman asked her boyfriend.

“Absolutely,” he assured her with a smile as he turned down another road. “Trust me; this may look like the middle of nowhere. And it is.”

She laughed softly, and he winked. “But we can get there more directly and with almost no traffic. We should be there by the evening.”

“Don’t speed too much”, she answered, pointing to an intersection in the distance. He looked up to see a police car pulled over to the side.

“Thanks,” he said, slowing down. “I need to turn left here anyway.”

They came to the intersection, and saw a road sign pointing in the direction they were headed that told them they were thirteen miles from a Monstruwakan Valley. The young man blinked, not recalling any particular town by that odd name, but shrugged it off as he made his turn.

Glancing slightly in the direction of the police car, he saw the state trooper looking straight at him. For some reason, it made him nervous. True, he wasn’t driving recklessly, and it wasn’t even the end of the month. Still…

The police car started up, and began to follow them. The man looked in the rearview mirror, and his hands tightened on the wheel. Maybe, the cop was just returning home, he thought. Maybe it was just the end of his shift.

The lights came on, and the siren began to wail. He swore, and pulled over.

"I knew it," he complained, rolling down the window as the police car pulled over behind them.

They looked over their shoulders as the state trooper walked out of the car towards them. The trooper was surprisingly short, only about five feet tall, and his uniform didn't seem to fit quite right.
Moreover, they caught a faint whiff of body odor when he reached the window.

The trooper and the man looked at each other. The young college student couldn't see much of the officer's face, as his brimmed hat was pushed down low, and mirrored sunglasses hid his eyes. But he could see that the officer had a full mouth and crooked teeth partially obscured by thick dark brown stubble.

The officer held out an equally hairy hand. "License and registration," he said in a rough voice.

"Yes, sir," the man replied, wondering where on earth New York state found this shifty, slovenly looking man. Clearly, standards upstate weren't on par with those of Manhattan.

After taking and examining their papers, the policeman asked the same

question they all did. "Do you know why I pulled you over?"

"No sir, honestly I don't," the man said, as the woman smiled nervously.

The policeman pointed down the road. "We've had heavy rains over the past

week. The road into town is damaged. I'm going to have to ask you to turn around and head back to the highway."

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“What? But officer, I checked the weather forecast yesterday,” he began, but the trooper gave him a hard stare. Although he couldn’t see any eyes behind the sunglasses, he felt the eyes boring into him with that look.

“You talking back to me, son?” the trooper asked quietly.

The young man swallowed nervously, and shook his head. “No sir,” he

answered meekly. Although short, they could see the muscles bulging under

the man’s shirt and hair.

Furthermore, the pungent odor made them feel slightly lightheaded when they breathed it in. Somehow, there was something not quite right about this man, and he just wanted to be on his way.

“Where are you headed?” the trooper asked after a few

tense seconds. “Niagara Falls, sir,” the man stammered.

Another pause ensued, and then the trooper handed the man his papers. “Go back to the highway, and you’ll get there. I’ll follow you back to the road sign. Drive safely.”

The trooper walked back to his squad car, and the two looked at

each other. “Honey?” the young woman asked, nervously.

“Let’s just get out of here,” he replied.

After rolling up his window and starting his car, he turned around and made a U turn into the other lane. Fortunately, no other cars could be seen on that road. Sure enough, the police car turned around as well, turned off its lights, and began

to follow them.

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To their immense relief, it pulled back into the spot where they first saw it at the intersection. As it shrank into the distance behind them, they decided that maybe it was for the best that they didn't pass through Monstruwakan Valley.

I

"Donald Fowler here to see Mr. and Mrs. Fowler, the gangly young man told the receptionist.

The secretary looked up at the young man who addressed her. Tall, thin, and awkward, he looked to be about twenty, and was dressed in rumpled clothes. His hair and beard were longer and unkempt, and his large brown eyes were covered with equally large thick glasses.

She might at first have thought he was a hippie, as the so called summer of love had been less than three years ago. However, she knew Donald Fowler, and knew that he didn't possess either a rebellious or an industrious bone in his body. He drifted from his small apartment to an occasional
lecture for his still undeclared major to this retirement home, where his well to do parents resided. She could have admired him for not neglecting his elderly family, except that she figured it was simply because he had no one else. He was an only child, born to his parents when they were almost too old to have children, and had never alluded to friends, male or female.

"Good evening, Don," she answered with a polite, if not really heartfelt smile. "Are you taking your parents down to the senior dance?"

He nodded. The home occasionally held events for its residents. Tonight, someone had cleared the tables from the dining room, found some old Glen Miller records, and invited the residents to dress up, dance, and remember happier times.

His mother, Joellen, in particular had been looking forward to it, having been fond of music, fine dining, and lively company since her youth. But his father, Tobias had

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called Don to ask him to fill in for him, as the elder Fowler man had been gradually losing his energy and will to do anything.

“You can go ahead then,” the receptionist said, pointing down the hall where his parents’ apartment was. “The dance should begin in about ten minutes.”

“All right,” Don answered, walking to the room. He never talked much to the secretary, since he suspected she didn’t like him very much. He wasn’t particularly one thing or another. He had neither been drafted into the still raging Vietnam War, nor had been one of the many protesters looking for another way of life through drugs and pleasure. He had no strong political or strong religious affiliations. He really couldn’t be pinned down to anything or anyone other than his parents, and most people didn’t like anyone else they couldn’t easily identify or understand.

He sighed, and knocked on the door. Joellen, his mother, answered, and smiled when she saw your son standing there.

“Don! You made it,” she greeted, hugging him and kissing him on the cheek. She had been a great beauty in her youth, and really still was for her age. Her silver hair had been cut and arranged in a becoming style, her bright blue eyes still shone, and she almost never wore excessive makeup, unlike other women her age. She was dressed in an elegant silver sparkling gown, with matching jewelry, and looked ready to have a fun evening.

“Hello mom,” Don answered. “How’s dad?”

Her smile wavered slightly, but she stood aside and beckoned him in. “He’s up, and in his chair,” she told him.

Don walked into their neat little apartment, and saw Tobias Fowler watching the news. His father, although fully dressed and bathed, was breathing heavily and had dark circles under his eyes. His dark eyes were barely open, but he heard his son, so he opened one eye a little more and nodded.

“Good evening, son,” he said in a hoarse voice. “Thanks for taking your mother. I don’t feel good enough to go anywhere.”

“Still?” Don asked, frowning. “Maybe you should go to the doctor.”

“I have. Nothing they can do.” Mr. Fowler waved at them. “Go on. Have

a good time.” “I’m going to need you to keep away any would be

suitors,” Joellen told Don.

Tobias grunted. “I’m old, Jo, not dead.”

“I know, dear.” She walked over, and kissed him on the forehead. Don frowned again, as he looked more closely at his parents. Both of them looked not only tired, but like they had lost weight. Weren’t their clothes hanging more loosely than the last time he was here? And was Joellen wearing more eye makeup than normal? To cover up dark circles of her own, perhaps?

“Are you sure you’re felling okay, mom?” Don asked.

She stood, ran a hand through her hair, and smiled slightly. “Oh yes, Don. I need to get out of this room. It’s not good to just sit all the time, you know.”

She took his arm, and led him out of the apartment. “Come. Let’s forget our troubles for a

while.”

The record played the lively, but old fashioned music clearly as elderly couples held on to each other and swayed back and forth. Don noted that he was by far the youngest here. Not surprising,

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really. Joellen smiled and twirled around with more energy than the others, but still less than her normal self. Don put his arms around her, and noted that his mother had indeed lost weight.

At first, he wondered if it was the food they were being served. But he looked over at the other people, and didn't see any evidence of malnourishment in the others. Moreover, there was no evidence of depression in either parent. What, then, was wearing them down?

His mother, meanwhile, talked to him softly throughout the dance, asking him question after question about his school and his life. Under her careful scrutiny he had been forced to admit that no, he hadn't declared a major, and no, he wasn't really interested in a job either.

Joellen looked at her son with concern. "Don, you're not living. You're just existing. That's not good; you need to find something to fill your life. Or someone, maybe. There's someone for everyone, you know."

"Oh yeah? What about drunks and wife beaters?" Don asked, trying to

lighten the mood. "Oh, Don."

"Look, there are plenty of nice girls around, but…" he trailed off.

"Is it us, Don? Is that why you don't get involved with anything? So you can have time for us?"

He looked at her. "No. I mean, of course I'll always be here for you, but…" he shook his head sheepishly. "Maybe I'm just too lazy. A job, a girlfriend, they all take time. And we only have so much as it is."

They swayed a few more times before Joellen answered. "I don't think you're

lazy, Don," she said at last. "I think you're afraid. Of anything new. Of anything uncomfortable."

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She looked into his eyes, with mingled love, concern, and disappointment. “You have to take chances, Don. Or nothing will ever change.”

He nodded, but his heart wasn’t in it. He didn’t really want to think about tomorrow, or even the day after.

“We don’t have much time on this Earth,” Don said again. “All the more reason to be careful.”

“Yes. But also all the more reason to make sure you’re really living, not existing.” She sighed, and looked around the room. “Here we are now. But before I was here, your father and I lived.
Adventures were to be had, the world was to be seen, and we did it all. There are some regrets, yes, but I can say I made the most of life.”

She paused for a minute, and Don shuffled nervously, interrupting the flow of the dance. Joellen leaned in and put her head on his shoulder, suddenly seeming more tired than she had been that day.

“Will you, Don?” she asked.

He didn’t answer, and they danced in silence for a few more minutes. Eventually, Joellen indicated that she was ready to return to her room. She walked by her son, arm in arm, and her eyes seemed to get slightly unfocused. Don wondered if he should call for a night nurse to check her blood pressure, but decided that as long as he got her back to her room, she could go to bed, and avoid a fall. The morning nurses would check on her and his father at med pass anyway.

They entered his parent’s darkened room. “Tobias?” Joellen called out.

A cough from the bedroom answered them. Looking at each other, they went

in. Tobias was lying on his back in bed, staring at the ceiling. In front of their bed was a dresser and an old silver mirror Joellen had made years ago, studying art overseas.

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Joellen lay down next to her husband, and gently shook him as Don noted with dismay that in less than two hours, his father had gotten worse. His breathing was sounding rattled, and his cheeks sunken in. But he opened his eyes, and was still able to focus on his son.

“Don,” he rasped weakly, but clearly.

Don immediately hit the call button next to the bed to summon the night nurse. She ran in, and Don told her to page the doctor on call right away.

“Don,” Tobias repeated.

“It’ll be okay, dad,” Don said, kneeling down and taking his hand.

“Don, do you still have the cross?” Tobias asked. “The cross of Roland

de Beaumont?” “Dad. Not that. Not now,” Don answered.

“You doubt there is a God,” his dad continued. “But it’s true. The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. Man’s fall into sin. The Son’s coming to Earth to die and atone. All of it is true.”

Don didn’t answer. He wanted to believe. He really did. But with the advance of science and the horrors of war and violence in the world, how could he?

“For our family, there’s more,” Tobias continued. “Do you remember the stories I told you when you were a boy? About where the cross came from?”

“Dad, those were just fairy stories…”

“Remember!” Tobias said, as forcefully as he could manage.

He was becoming agitated, and Joellen looked at him imploringly. Realizing he needed to calm his father down, Don nodded, and began to recall the unusual bedtime story he was told in lieu of more traditional ones.

“Long ago, before the pyramids of Egypt or the foundation of Ur, there was the ancient city of Apsu. Apsu was ruled by Inana, an evil warrior queen who also was a necromancer and creator of monstrous headless beasts.

“Inana forged an alliance with the demon, Nergal. She acquired immortality, and seven powerful stone tablets capable of connecting the worlds of the living and the dead. In return, she was to bring Nergal to the world. So that he might destroy all God made. But she was betrayed, and the main tablet stolen.”

“By Atrahasis and Ninshabar,” Tobias spoke up. “Her servants and our ancestors. They kept the tablet and their descendants hid the tablet from her for years and years.

“Then, nearly two hundred years ago, the brothers Roland and Roger de Beaumont, along with Roger’s wife, Constance, fought Inana while she hid in a castle in France. Roland, a priest, received a mighty gift from God, the very cross we now have. For I am the many times great grandson of Ruth,
Roger and Constance’s daughter. The tablet is still kept to this day by the descendants of Jean, Ruth’s elder brother.”

Tobias tried to sit up, and failed. Joellen stood and propped some pillows behind his back. He nodded his thanks, but his breath was still labored, so he looked again upon his worried son.

“Don, I need the cross,” he said. “I think, no I know, it can help me. Even

more than prayer, and that’s itself a great help. It’s a gift from God. Please tell me you still have it.”

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“Yes, father, I do.” Don had it in a box somewhere in his closet. He respected it as a family

heirloom, but didn’t really think of it often. Certainly he didn’t believe in anything supernatural about it.

“Bring it, Don. And try to get in touch with our cousins, the Beaumonts. I’m afraid I’ve lost contact with them the last few years.”

There was a knock on the door, and Joellen stood to answer it. Don licked his lips. Although his father seemed calmer now, he wished Tobias would just forget those crazy legends. Why, when he was otherwise perfectly rational and sane, did he insist on holding onto those stories?

“I will, dad. But one thing. Even if all those

stories are true…” “Of course they are.”

“Well, even so, didn’t that story end with Inana falling off a ledge? Shouldn’t she be dead? She was supposedly immortal, but not indestructible.”

Joellen and the doctor came in, and the doctor began pulling out his stethoscope.

“No, son. She survived. My parents and grandparents fought her sixty years ago when my father was working for Edison Studios. I’ve told you that.”

“Well, yes. But again, you said she was trapped in a fallen down house or something like that.”

“Once more, they never found a body. And my father told me that the house’s basement had access to the sewer system. They believe that she survived yet again, so they contacted the Beaumonts, despite years of separation. They believed that we should work together to bring her down. We have to remain

vigilant. We…”

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He broke off, and coughed again. The doctor was listening to his heart and lungs and shaking his head. Joellen stood, and saw Don to the door.

“Do you believe all that, mother?” he asked her quietly in the hallway.

“Yes, Don, I do,” she answered. “Your father would never lie and besides… I’ve felt a …a goodness whenever I held the cross. Somehow, it really isn’t an ordinary object.”

She looked at him one last time. “Please hurry. Bring it as

fast as you can.” “All right, mother, all right.”

Don turned to go, and Joellen closed the door. A cough escaped her as the door shut.

II

Don lived in a rundown but fairly clean apartment building several blocks from the retirement home. Although twenty minutes walking, he figured that that would be faster than trying to take the crowded subway or the notoriously unobtainable taxis. Sure enough, he walked up to the dull grey building in relatively no time, entered the elevator, and went up to the top floor.

Most of the people in the building were middle aged or elderly, but his landlady, Judy Harris, had a small two year old whom Don could hear riding his tricycle in their apartment’s main room as he stepped off the elevator. Walking down the hall, he turned his head to the Ms. Harris’ open door. Sure enough, he saw a little boy pumping the pedals with all his might across the hardwood floor. The boy stopped, and looked at Don with large eyes.

Don smiled, and waved, but the boy didn’t return

his greeting. “Aren’t you supposed to be in bed?”

Don asked lightly.

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The boy took one more look at him, then turned his tricycle and pedaled out of sight. Don shrugged and was about to turn away, when Ms. Harris appeared in the doorway.

“Mr. Fowler,” she said, nodding.

“Good evening, ma’am. How are you?” Don asked.

“Rent’s coming up due, Fowler,” she replied. She spoke to him about non business matters rarely, if at all. Indeed, he had been told fairly early on that people here preferred to keep to themselves.

Fowler dug into his pockets, pulled out a few dollars, and handed them to her. She counted them and then raised her eyebrows.

“I know, it’s not enough yet,” he admitted. “I’ll go to the bank tomorrow. Right now, though, I need to get something and go back out. My parents aren’t doing well.”

“Sorry to hear that. Just be quiet when you do

get back in.” “I will. Good day, Ms. Harris.”

She grunted as Don took out his key, and walked over to the last door in the hallway. He opened his door, and walked into his small two room apartment. It consisted of a kitchen/ living room combination and a bedroom, all sparsely furnished.

In his bedroom, he found a small box on the bottom of the closet floor. When he opened it, he found the contents to be only a few of his parents’ papers, and a simple wooden cross.

He picked up the latter, and held it up. It had no distinct features, and was smooth and light to the touch. Oddly enough, it appeared to be a single piece, not two put together like one would expect.

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Even odder, he did feel some of his anxiety leave him as he held it. Odd indeed, as he hadn't been to church since his childhood, and wasn't even sure if he believed.

He stood and selected a coat from his closet. Since it was now dark, the temperature had fallen, and he was going to walk back. Putting it on, he put the cross in his pocket and headed back out. He only could hope it would really make a difference with his parents.

He knocked on the glass doors of the nursing home, not wanting to disrupt the residents' sleep, but trying to get the secretary's attention. Finally, she did come up, and when she saw who it was, let him in. However, before he could go on to his parents' room, she stopped him.

"Mr. Fowler," she began.

He looked down the hall, where his parents' apartment was. The doctor and nurse were coming out, looking grave. One look from them confirmed the worst.

It was too late. His father was gone.

He blinked, dazed, not knowing what to say or do.

"Oh…oh no," he stammered as the doctor came up and put a hand on his shoulder. Don blinked back tears before answering.

"How's mom?"

The doctor and the nurse exchanged a look before they said anything. "Don…I can't explain this," the doctor said hesitantly. "Your mother began coughing and having congestion after you left. Then she lay down next to your father, and they both just seemed to shut down."

He never finished. Don ran to his parents' open apartment, and went straight to the bedroom. His mother and father lay side by side, holding hands as if they had crossed the threshold at the same time, never to be parted.

> Don gasped in disbelief and increasing anguish. Too late. He had come with the cross too late.

But how could that be? He had been gone for only an hour, at most, and the landlady couldn't have detained him for more than a few minutes.

How then, especially with his mother? Hadn't they been dancing only two hours ago? She hadn't even had the chance to change out of her dress.

He looked down at his parents. Both of them had sunken cheeks, and cold clammy looking skin. They had been declining over the last few weeks of course, but not like this. What had happened; how could life be taken so fast?

A sob choked its way out from Don's throat, and he knelt down and cried. They were gone, and he was alone. Alone with nobody and nothing to give him any real purpose. He didn't care about their money. Right now, he didn't care about anything. He couldn't even think; he could only cry.

He became aware of a faint footstep, and looked up. He was facing his mother's mirror, and saw his reflection there, along with those of the bed and his parents. But he also saw something else.

An odd, man shaped silhouette in the doorway. He could see no features, but thought it might be the doctor standing at an odd angle, so he turned around.

No one was there. He blinked, and looked over his shoulder again. Only the contents of the room could now be seen in the mirror. He wiped his eyes, and put his head back on the bed. He needed to see straight, needed to think straight. He

was on his own now. He was alone.

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Fresh sobs caused him to tremble, and he just lay there, giving vent to his grief. He choked up, and began to cough. His head swam, and when he looked up and opened his eyes, he could hardly see through the tears. Strange how much like sickness grief felt.

Then, without really knowing why, he pulled out the cross of Roland de Beaumont. Holding it up, and looking at it, he felt slight warmth in his hand, very faint, but undeniably there. He remembered his mother telling him how she felt goodness and peace whenever she held it.

Sure enough, his eyes and throat cleared, although the deep sadness and fear remained. He wiped the tears, and looked curiously at the old heirloom. Could it really be any help? Or could the one whom it represented be of help?

He glanced up at the mirror again, and bolted to his feet. The shadow in the doorway was back, and in the reflection. Don saw it duck out of the apartment. He turned and ran into the hallway, looking back and forth.

At one end, he saw nothing. At the other end, the doctor and nurse were still talking to each other in low voices, while the secretary spoke with a coroner over the phone.

III

A week passed, and Don decided that he hated society's custom of a showing and a funeral.

First, he had collapsed on the rest home's lobby's couch and slept till early morning. Then, he had to answer a bunch of questions with the doctor about his parents' final moments. Then came the meeting with the lawyer to sort out his parents' estate.

They had had few possessions and no property, having sold off most of their things before coming here. There was a sizeable bank account, and their will had declared him the only heir. So he

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had to answer a bunch more questions, which he was assured were standard, about his relationship with his parents and the nature of their deaths.

The medical report had found nothing that could be determined as to the exact cause of death. No poison or other foreign chemicals were detected, nor were there any traces of any virus or bacteria. As the doctor had said, they could find no reason why they experienced what appeared to be respiratory failure in a matter of hours.

If all this wasn't bad enough, he had had to find his parents' address book and call a bunch of relatives and friends of theirs to give the news and to arrange a funeral. Most of them he barely knew, if at all.

And for these people, he had to schedule a showing and funeral, where he had to stand in the front of a room for two days, his parents displayed behind him, and get hugs and platitudes when all he wanted was to go to his apartment and sleep for a week.

The funeral had bad music, and only seemed designed to make everyone sadder than they already were, and more people he didn't know told stories of times he'd never seen.

Yet, he thought bitterly, if he didn't go through this farce, he'd be accused of not really loving them, and of only caring about their money. Never mind that nothing could be farther from the truth.

Mercifully, the services came to an end by the grave sites. The preacher said a few more words, the grave diggers stood at the back, and he had to endure only a few more awkward moments before people began filing out.

Two of the last people, a man and a woman, were among the last to leave. They had stood on the edge of the crowd, and while apparently they came together, didn’t seem to belong with any of the

others. Don couldn’t remember their names, although he guessed that they were distant relatives. The

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man, from what he could see behind sunglasses and a wide brimmed hat had facial features not unlike his own, but better looking. The woman had long black hair, and olive skin, and also wore dark headgear and glasses.

They had, he realized, been two of the only people who hadn't said a word to him the entire time. Instead, they had been more interested in the corpses of his parents. At the showing, they had looked intently at them for several minutes, and then whispered several things to one another.

Now, as everyone else was filing out, and the gravediggers were getting their shovels ready, they looked like they wanted to say something to him. However, they looked around, seemed to reconsider, and left in a nondescript car parked at the end of the funeral procession. Don sighed, and went to his own car.

He barely remembered driving home. Despite the fairly pleasant weather outside, he felt tired, and numb. A few more tears ran down his cheeks, but he didn't even bother wiping them. Every move he made seemed to require immense effort, and he silently trudged up the stairs of his apartment building rather than waiting for the elevator.

Ms. Harris' door was still open, as she only closed and locked it at night. Probably so that either tenants could talk to her, or she could catch people who were behind on their rent. The landlady reclined on her couch while her son raced his tricycle around the room. They both looked at him for a second, and then looked down awkwardly, clearly having nothing to say. Bless her, she had shown him more consideration than all the people at the funeral.

He went in to his own apartment, and flopped down on his bed without even bothering to get undressed. He thought about eating, but decided against it. His stomach felt upset, and he doubted he could keep anything down. Before he could do any more, even cry, he was fast asleep.

Around the middle of the night, he awakened to hear something scratching at his door.

Frowning, he stood, straightened his glasses, and turned on the light. Then he opened the door and looked outside.

The hall was empty, and would have been dark if not for the auxiliary lights in the ceiling that gave the hall a faint soft glow. He was just going to go back to bed, figuring that he had imagined it, when he heard scratching coming from the end of the hall, in the elevator.

His brow furrowed, and he stepped out into the dimly lit hallway. As he walked, he noted something curious. The doors to the other apartments were open. He wondered why when during the day, he almost never saw more than one or two open at any one time. He looked inside the door on his right.

And he saw a skeleton seated on the sofa. The television glowed in front of it, playing some program and casting eerie shadows on the bones.

Don, startled, looked behind him in the apartment on his left. Another skeleton lay sprawled on the floor, as though its owner had been struck dead on the spot, and the body left to crumble away. He moved forward, looking into rooms and seeing more skeletons of his fellow tenants. Confused, frightened, and not even knowing whether this was a dream or reality, he reached the Harris' door.

A little skeleton hunched over a tricycle in the middle of the floor. Don remembered the

landlady’s sullen son, and realized that this was him, or supposed to be him. Then, while the bones

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didn’t move, the tricycle slowly began to roll towards him. He cried out and reached for the door knob. He shut the door before the skeleton could reach him. But he still heard a soft bump on the other side of the door as it rolled into it. He backed away, and heard another tapping sound coming from back towards this room. He looked back, and saw his door closing by itself slowly to keep him in the hall.

Now, he felt a cold sweat break out on his brow. He only wanted to get away. He only wanted…

A low growl could be heard by the elevator. He turned, and his jaw dropped. Crouching in front of the door, he saw a squat, hairy thing. It had no head, but a sort of mouth filled with teeth occupied the spot where the neck should be. Its hands and feet had claws, and it shuffled towards him with movement somewhere between an ape and a wolf.

He wanted to scream, to run, and to even take his chances in one of the rooms containing the skeletons. But he found he couldn’t move, couldn’t even close his eyes as the headless, but still

growling thing approached closer and closer…

Don sat up in his bed quickly, crying out and reaching for his night stand. His flailing fingers somehow managed to find the light, and he turned it on to see nothing more than his room. He wiped sweat off his forehead, and fumbled for his glasses. Putting them on, he looked over at his clock to see that it was still several hours before morning.

He tried to lie back down, but couldn’t keep the dream out of his mind.

Granted, his dreaming about death would have come as no surprise to anyone, given his circumstances. Still, the dream had not only vividness, but something else. A sinister quality that made him feel the hint of a presence, something just out of the corner of his eye or just outside of his perception.

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He glanced over at his mother's ornate silver mirror, suddenly remembering the man shaped shadow he had glimpsed the night his parents had died. Although he had initially dismissed it as an optical illusion, part of him expected to see it again. But no, only the regular natural world cast a reflection now.

Yet, Don still couldn't relax enough to fall back to sleep. Also, while feeling childish about it, he wasn't about to turn out the light. So, what was he supposed to do now, just cower until the sun came up?

He looked over at his nightstand again, and saw the cross. Slowly, he reached over and picked it up. Clasping it to his chest, he closed his eyes and tried breathing deeply.

It was a silly thing to do, he thought. He didn't believe, and even if he did, could God's presence actually be contained in a wooden cross? Yet, he found himself unable to deny that he felt better. The fear ebbed away, and along with it, images of skeletons and monsters.

His eyes grew heavier, and his breathing deepened. Before he knew it, he had drifted back asleep. This time, he had the vague notion of walking through a sunny green forest, but could never say for sure.

IV

When he finally awakened, Don noted that it was nearly noon. His parents were now buried, the affairs in order, and he wondered what on earth he was supposed to do now. He had already missed morning lectures, not that he really cared. He had no job and while he figured he'd eventually need something to do, right now he had no idea.

He glanced in the mirror and grimaced. He wasn't especially handsome, even on a good day, and looked worse than homeless now. Well, a shower and maybe some lunch would be in order, if nothing else.

An hour later, he sat at an outside table in a bistro near Central Park. Quietly sipping his coffee and eating a sandwich, he enjoyed the relative warmth of the spring sun, and the crowd of passersby before him.

A bus pulled up to the intersection nearest him and let off a few passengers. The door was on the opposite side from him, so he couldn't see until the bus drove away. As it did, he was about to turn back to his food when he noted a man and woman standing on the corner, dressed in black and looking straight at him.

It was the couple from his parents' funeral, the ones who hadn't spoken. He stiffened as they walked across the street, clearly approaching him. Not that he felt exactly threatened, not in broad daylight. But they moved with a purpose and a sense of quiet urgency that unnerved him.

He stood as they reached him, wondering what to expect. Then the man extended his hand. "Donald Fowler?" he asked.

"Yes," Don answered hesitantly. "And you are?"

"Charles Beaumont," the man identified himself. He pointed to the woman. "This is my wife, Sherri. I'm pleased to meet you."

"May we sit with you, Donald?" Sherri asked.

“I suppose so,” he answered. “And just call me Don.”

They all sat back down. Don waved a waiter over so that his guests could order something to drink. They ordered coffee and a serving of biscuits, and spoke with him while they waited.

“I saw you at the funeral,” Don remarked. “But I’m afraid I don’t know you.”

“I’m a distant cousin,” Charles told him. “The other branch of Roger de Beaumont’s line. When they immigrated to England, the name got shortened somewhat. Probably, they wanted to distance themselves from the French Revolution.”

“Charles is a history teacher back home,” Sherri explained with a smile. “Don’t get him started or you’ll be here all afternoon.”

Don smiled slightly as the waiter arrived with their food and drink. Their easygoing manner put him a little more at ease, despite them being total strangers. He could tell Charles was really a cousin as he could almost pass for an older brother. His father had told him once that all the men of their family had essentially the same face. Tobias had called it the look of Atrahasis, although he still didn’t want to think about those crazy legends.

“And where might home be?” Don asked Sherri.

“Monstruwakan Valley. A small town here in New York, but several hours upstate.” She raised an eyebrow. “Ever heard of it?”

“No. But then again, I don’t travel much. You?”

“Very seldom. The town’s only real industry is a pharmaceutical research

company, founded by my grandpa. That’s where I work, and our jobs keep us too busy for vacations.”

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She took a drink of coffee, and Charles picked up the thread of conversation. “We always wanted to reconnect with Tobias and Joellen. I met them briefly when I was a kid. Life unfortunately gets in the way.”

“Or slips away,” Don said. He took a biscuit and bit into it. Charles ate one himself, washed it down with some coffee, and regarded his cousin thoughtfully.

“So…Don. What are you going to do now?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I’m taking some classes, but I haven’t even declared a major. I just can’t get into it.” He shrugged. “I told mom before she died that I was lazy, but she didn’t believe it.”

Charles smiled, and reached into his coat. “Oh, I doubt that’s it. I think you just need to find your purpose.”

“I take it you have a suggestion?” Don asked, raising

his eyebrows. “Perhaps.”

Charles pulled out a book from his coats inside pocket. The book was extremely old, with yellowing pages that looked as if it would fall apart any moment. On its cover, in flowing script, was written T*he Cult of the Inverted Kingdom*.

“What’s this?” Don asked.

“Well, Sherri told you I teach history,” Charles said. “I thought you’d be interested in this. You see, this book was written by an ancestor of ours many centuries ago. Allegedly, it was first written in the language of Persia, before it was found and translated into Latin by Roland de Beaumont during his time in the abbey

in France. I’m working on an English translation myself.”

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He laid the book on the table, and opened it up. Thumbing carefully through it, he found a page, and turned it over to Don.

Don was intrigued, but also confused. “Interesting. But what does this have to do with me?” Charles pointed to the page. “Read that.”

Don read the passage, or rather Charles’ hasty translation in the margin. He read how the demon Nergal had allied himself with the necromancer, Inana. It spoke about how the necromancer, in turn, had been able to summon evil spirits who could cause sickness. By stealing vitality and strength, the bodies of the spirits’ victims would be prone to all manner of infection. The telltale signs included rapid decline, often over mere days or even hours.

> Victims would lose weight and hair. Their faces would get sunken in and haggard in appearance.

The lungs would fill with fluid, and the victim would cough incessantly. Their skin would turn gray and clammy before finally succumbing in the end.

The most terrifying thing, however, was that the victims and or those around them would always see dark shapes lurking nearby. The spirits would almost never leave any doubt that the disease wasn’t natural.

Don looked up at his cousin with dismay. He couldn’t help remembering now that he saw a shadow in his parents’ doorway on their last night alive.

“When you were making your calls, to tell the family that your parents were dead, we had to come and see them,” Charles said. “When Sherri and I looked at their bodies, they almost exactly matched the symptoms in this book.”

Don stiffened, and Sherri put his hand over his. “Don, I know this must be hard for you,” she said gently. “But please. We need your help.”

“Don, did you see anything strange lately?” Charles asked, fixing him with a penetrating stare. “Any shadows? Apparitions? Noises?”

He stood up quickly, feeling a lump in his stomach, and a sense of strong, but undefined dread.

Sherri and Charles stood up as well. A few of the patrons glanced

over curiously. “That’s a yes, isn’t it?” Charles asked.

“I…I have to go?” Don said.

“Go? Where?” Charles asked. “You should stay with us.”

“I don’t want any part of the family stories,” Don said, taking a

step back. “Charles,” Sherri began.

Charles waved a hand at her for her to be quiet. “Don. Come with us back home. You need us and we need you.”

“Leave me alone!” Don answered, a little more loudly than he had intended. He turned and walked away quickly.

Charles called after him, but he didn’t turn until he was a block away. He ventured a glance over his shoulder, and saw that they weren’t following him. Instead, Sherri seemed to be arguing with her husband. He realized that he hadn’t even paid the waiter but he didn’t care. Let them handle it.

He realized that they had probably looked him up, and knew where he lived. That would have explained how they knew where to find him. He wondered if he should go home or not, but decided he might as well. If they had wanted to hurt him, they would have done so before now.

On the other hand, if something else wanted to

hurt him… No. He wouldn't even think about it.

V

Two hours later, Don sat on his bed, with no idea what to do. He had gone on home, and upon entering his apartment, had put the cross back around his neck. He had told himself that he did so because he felt like it, not because he had felt a slight chill upon entering the room. Not because he had coughed once. Surely that was just dust in the air.

He had spent the better part of the last couple hours pacing his room. He had opened the

curtains and turned on all the lights. He kept going back to his mother's mirror, gazing deeply into the glass, looking for anything that might be out of place.

He had seen nothing, and felt like a foolish child for jumping and startling at every shadow. It was ridiculous; he was a sensible, rational man. He didn't believe in ghosts or demons.

But he remembered what he had seen the night his parents had died.

Next to him was a half packed duffel bag. The fancy of taking a small trip had struck him. He had told himself that he wasn't running from anything. He just needed a change of scenery. And he wasn't wearing the cross because of any

superstition. He just liked the fact that it reminded him of his family.

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But he remembered the comfort it brought him after his nightmare. And how he really felt better wearing it.

The door knocked, and he quickly got to

his feet. “Who is it?” he called out.

“It’s me,” Ms. Harris called out.

He walked over, and opened up the door. His landlady indeed stood there, flanked on either side by Charles and Sherri. So they had been following him. Great. Just great.

“Don, these two say they’re your cousins,” Ms. Harris told him. “They wanted to speak with

you.”

“Don, please. It’s very important,” Sherri said.

Charles held up a metal safety deposit box. “We have something here to show you,” he told him. Sherri had a suitcase as well.

“Don?” the landlady asked, when she saw him hesitate.

He really didn’t want to let them in. But if he made a scene, his landlady would demand an explanation anyway. She could never leave anything alone. Since he didn’t want to tell her anything either, he nodded and motioned for Charles and Sherri to come in.

“Thanks, Don,” Sherri told him, with a slight smile to put him Ms. Harris at ease. He didn’t reply, but shut the door behind them, and motioned to the table in the main room. Charles sat down, and fumbled for the box’s key in his pockets.

Sherri meanwhile walked over to the window, glanced out of it, and then shut the drapes.

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“What’s that for?” Don asked.

“Privacy,” she answered, sitting down next to her husband.

Don sat across from them as his cousin found the key and opened the box.

He pulled out something that Don had heard about his whole life, but never imagined actually existed. It was a stone tablet, adorned with strange indecipherable writing. Older than anything he had ever seen at any museum, the tablet looked as if it would crumble away at any time. But when he ran his fingers over it, it was both cold and hard to the touch, and without needing to be told, he knew that he gazed upon the seventh tablet of Inana.

“Family history,” Don whispered.

Charles nodded. “Our family history. Our task. Inana is real. And she seeks this tablet to this very day.”

“But she died, didn’t she?” Don asked.

“Sherri will have to tell you that part of the story,” Charles replied.

“Sherri is my nickname,” she said. “But my birth name is Ashera Zabel. I was born into the cult of Inana.”

She looked at the tablet and seemed to gather her thoughts before continuing.

“As you know, Inana has been alive for thousands of years. She has been served by a group of people descended from both her original city and from the followers of Enki, a man who led a community she conquered. The children of Enki were at odds with the children of Tammuz, as they

called the other half of her followers. But fear of Inana and the belief that she might be a goddess kept them loyal.

"Then, everything changed about two hundred years ago. The de Beaumonts fought Inana in France and she very nearly died."

"That was the last my family branch heard of her until recently," Charles interjected.

Sherri nodded. "Her followers recovered both her and her tablets. But she was very weak. It took her many, many years to get her physical strength back. Mentally, I don't know if she was ever the same. All I know is that she grew more withdrawn, even from her closest followers. She kept us all hidden for about three generations, before finally following the Beaumonts to America.

"That's when the children of Enki knew that she was no goddess. She was only a human necromancer, and a fading one at that. So my grandfather, Alastair, looked for a way to separate from her."

"What happened?" Don asked.

"The children of Enki began to give Inana and her children of Tammuz misinformation on the whereabouts of the Beaumonts and the seventh tablet. My grandfather became interested in the emerging fields of modern chemistry and medicine. He began to think he could heal and create as good, if not better than the necromancer's magic.

"So about fifty years ago, my grandfather and the other children of Enki, scores of people and about half of Inana's followers, left one night."

"Just like that?" Don asked.

“Remember, one of Inana’s main duties for her people is to spy,” Sherri replied. “And they

didn’t bother with much more than the clothes on their backs. Grandpa withdrew thousands of dollars from the cult’s bank accounts, and we settled in Monstruwakan Valley.”

She paused, and let Don take in all of this information. To be sure, he felt overwhelmed; not

only were the old family stories apparently true, but the notion of Inana’s cult splitting in two only made things more complicated.

“What is it you want?” Don asked at last. “Clearly not the tablet’s power or you would have already returned it to Inana.”

He looked at Charles. “By the way, how did you fall in with them?”

Charles smiled faintly. “The children found me and my family about ten years ago. They kidnapped us, and brought us to Monstruwakan Valley. Once they told us their story, and convinced us that they really didn’t serve Inana anymore, we decided to join forces.”

He put his arm around Sherri. “I met Sherri and we fell in love. She agreed to become a

Christian and my wife. That’s what we want, Don. We want only to live lives free of the necromancer. Only, we don’t know if that’s even possible unless we challenge her on her own ground.”

“You mean…”

“Yes. We are preparing to issue a challenge to her. We’re not going to run this time. We will lure her to our town, and if possible, take her down. And we need you.”

“Why? What am I supposed to do? I didn’t even believe any of this. I’m not sure I do now.” “How can you possibly say that?” Charles asked.

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“Because, if I believe, that means I have to be a part of it,” Don retorted. “I can’t stay out.” “Do you really think you can now?” Sherri asked gently.

“You did see one of the spirits,” Charles added. “Didn’t you?”

“So what? I don’t have the tablet. You do. So, go on. Ambush her if you think you can.”

He took a deep breath. “Look. I don’t have anything against either one of you. But why drag me into it? Why would Inana care about me? And again, what could I do to help?”

“Because you have the cross,” Charles told him, pointing to the heirloom around Don’s neck. “You have probably one of the only things Inana fears. Haven’t you ever wondered how she was beaten all those years ago?”

“No. I’ve never questioned a fall being able to kill someone.”

“Very funny. But she was already weakened before Constance de Beaumont sent her over the tower’s edge. And again, when Meredith Vance faced her down with it, she destroyed the house with her telekinesis, but couldn’t break the cross directly. The cross was given to Roland de Beaumont in a vision. It is a gift from God. Not only can it perform exorcisms, but it can also take the will and spiritual strength from an evil being.”

Charles leaned in close, and Don put a hand to the cross. “Alone, Inana may well try to kill you and have one of her followers dispose of the cross. But with us, it could aid in ridding the world of her forever.”

“Fine.” Don pulled it off of his neck, and tossed it on the table. “Take it. You know how to use it, don’t you? It’s a reminder of mom and dad, but if it gets you

and all this craziness away from me…”

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“Don, that’s not it. I want you with us. I don’t want Inana to take any more lives, and I’m not sure she wouldn’t try to kill you anyway,” Charles protested.

“I was born after my family fled her, so I’ve never actually seen the necromancer,” Sherri spoke up. “But grandpa has told me all about her. She is filled with hatred. Hatred for all your family. She’s been relentless for years, and she won’t likely let any of you go if she has a choice.”

“Besides, you’re a witness,” Charles reminded him. “She’s been very careful about maintaining secrecy and leaving no trace of her activities. She wants no third party, like the police or the government, interfering with her either. And since you, unlike some of your ancestors, don’t know how to use the cross, she would see you as an easy target. She would see this as a good opportunity to come out of hiding.”

Charles paused, and then reached into the box. He pulled out two objects. One was a handwritten notebook. The other was a film reel. Sherri opened her case, and Don noted that it contained an old fashioned movie projector.

“Tobias tracked my parents and I down several years ago, despite the family intentionally not staying close to one another,” Charles explained as Sherri began setting it up. “He said he had evidence that Inana was alive before I even met Sherri. Did you know your grandfather was involved in movie making?”

“Yes,” Don said. “Emil Fowler worked at Edison’s movie company decades ago. His wife, Jen, was the sister of Frieda Vance, an actress at the time. But you actually have a print of his work? I
thought those early films were lost.”

“Most of them. This one evidently survived.” Charles pointed to the wall as

Sherri projected the image. A title card proclaimed the picture's title as the Mejnor Hauntings. A shot of a castle appeared,

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and Don saw two women walking around a circle of stone tablets, apparently chanting. Another title card explained that they were necromancers, responsible for illnesses and raising the dead. More shots of sick people were shown, as well as a ‘corpse’ rising from its grave.

The view changed to the necromancers again. Charles pointed at the smaller figure. “That was Frieda Vance,” he said. “And the other…”

The other was much larger, with black hair and eyes. This person looked on the other actress as though angry with her. Then she looked at the camera itself, and Don got a look at her face. He shuddered; never had he seen such hate, such anger in those eyes. The view then changed to a priest and a nobleman leading a charge of farmers to the castle. The title card said that Roland and Roger de Beaumont were the force of good that would stand against the necromancer. Then the film cut off.

“It was a troubled production,” Charles said. He and Sherri replaced the projector and film reel. “Frieda Vance died during production, and there was a fire at the studio. The film was never released, and we believe that the other actress was none other than Inana, trying to keep her existence a secret. She will surely come for you, too, if she was willing to stop a whole production in broad daylight.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” Don shook his head.

Charles and Sherri looked at one another. Then, they stood up to go. Charles reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card, telling the name of a hotel.

“Look. I don’t want to force you to do anything,” he said. “We’re staying there, and heading home in the morning. If you want to come, to at least see what

we’re going to try to do, be there in the lobby by nine. In the meantime, keep the notebook and film. The notebook is written by Meredith, Jen and Frieda’s grandmother. She couldn’t speak at the end of her life, but the last few entries also give evidence for the necromancer.”

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He gathered up the tablet, and replaced it in the lockbox. Sherri hugged him, and then they left. Don didn't see them out, but did pick up the cross again. He turned it over in his hands, and put it back around his neck. He put his head in his hands.

Another knock sounded, and he stood to open the door. Ms.

Harris was there. "Sorry. But I need to collect the rest of this

month's rent," she told him.

He nodded, and pulled out his wallet. As he counted out the remainder of his debt, and gave it to her, she peered into his room. No doubt looking for fresh gossip, he thought.

"So, were those two really your cousins?" she

asked. "Yes," he said.

She looked at him, clearly waiting for an elaboration. Don looked back, not wanting to say any more, and she turned away before it got awkward.

"Weird people," she grunted, heading back to

her room. You can say that again, he thought.

Reluctantly, he sat down, and began to peruse the notebook. Most of it was mundane messages, evidently used to communicate. But on the last page there was one message that immediately jumped out at him.

Inana lives.

VI

The next morning came, and Don did end up meeting Charles and Sherri. They drove out of the city, and towards the direction of upstate New York. The trip proved relatively uneventful, and the three chatted about various things, some lighthearted, some not.

A few hours later, they turned off of the highway, and went down a back country road. Don noted a sign that pointed in the direction of, and gave the name of Monstruwakan Valley. He also noted a police car off to the side, checking for speeders.

To his mild surprise, Charles slowed down and pulled over. Don looked at his cousin questioningly, when the door to the police car opened, and a short rumpled looking state trooper approached them. Charles rolled down the window and waited.

When the state trooper stepped over to the window, Don was greeted by an ugly, hairy face that peered suspiciously in.

“License and registration, please,” it said.

“It’s okay, Maskull,” Charles replied. “It’s only us.”

The officer, Maskull, looked closer. After a minute of seeming to process the information, he nodded. “It’s good to see you, Professor Beaumont. But, who’s that with you?”

He pointed a hairy finger at Don, who tried to meet his gaze through the man’s mirrored sunglasses. However, he found out that he somehow couldn’t. There was something not quite right about the strange man. Something almost unnatural.

“This is Don Fowler, Maskull,” Charles answered. “He’s with us. Do you understand? He’s a

friend.”

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Charles told the trooper this in a rather slow, and loud, almost patronizing tone of voice. But rather than act insulted, Maskull merely paused again, and looked at Fowler. He sniffed loudly several times, and then stepped back.

“Welcome home,” he told Charles. “Drive safely.”

He turned then, and walked back into his car. Charles drove back on the road, and continued to the town.

“What was that all about?” Don asked.

“We’ll explain later,” Charles replied. “Look ahead.”

They drove past a few houses, and then onto the main street of Monstruwakan Valley, New York. Don looked around to see a fairly nondescript main drag. A grocery store stood next to a movie theater, which was across from a church and service station. A few blocks later, they came to the town square, with its normal city hall in the middle of a courtyard. The road went around this, bordered with the post office, police station, and a few more small businesses.

Charles drove north, and Don saw another street of houses. At the end of the road was a large rectangular building and another road that headed west, presumably back to more familiar parts of the state.

Charles pulled into the driveway of a small two story home. They all got out, and walked up to the door. Charles had fetched his and Sherri’s suitcase from the trunk, while Don carried in his duffel bag containing only a change or two of clothes. He still wasn’t sure whether he’d be staying any longer than that.

Sherri knocked on the door and was greeted by Charles' parents and younger brother, Timothy, whom Don hadn't even heard about before today. They all greeted them warmly and welcomed Don as well.

"We were just about to sit down for dinner," Charles' mother told them.

They sat down to a turkey dinner, and Don's mouth watered. He couldn't remember the last time he had had a home cooked meal. It had really been too long.

They said grace, and while eating, Charles' family had plied Don with questions about what his life was like. Don hadn't had much to say, apart from a few comments about his parents and how they had died.

Charles, however, gently stirred the conversation away from such matters.

"We needn't go into that today," he assured Don and the others. "Today, let us simply enjoy being together at home."

"And what of your home here?" Don asked Charles. "The town seems small, but are your people the only ones here?"

"For the most part," Charles answered. "There was a town before Sherri's people came, but the town was run down and on its last legs. Out here in the middle of nowhere and with an ageing
population to boot."

"But grandpa started a pharmaceutical company that brought revenue back into the community," Sherri replied. "It's also where I work, along with the other children of Enki."

“And are you all Christians now?” Don asked, remembering Charles’ earlier comments, plus the fact that Sherri had bowed her head at grace.

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“Many of us have, yes. But many of the others are secular,” she answered. “Including grandpa, I’m afraid. He looks to Enki, our ancestor, as an example of working for yourself, and no one higher. I wish I could convince him otherwise.”

“Forgive me, but you didn’t just convert for your husband’s sake?”

She studied him for a moment, not sure how to take the question. “No, I did not. Oh, it helped.” She smiled at Charles, and kissed him. “But God is real. The Son is real. I’ve felt him near in my prayers.”

“I wish I could,” Don said quietly. “I really do.”

VII

The next day, Don met Charles downstairs to find out that Sherri wasn’t feeling well, and

wouldn’t be joining them on the tour of the pharmaceutical company. Don asked if she was having the same symptoms as his parents had, but Charles assured him that that wasn’t what was happening.

They walked rather than drove to the plant, as it was only a few blocks away and the day was sunny. In a few minutes, they walked through the parking lot to the front door. Before either Don or Charles could get the door, however, another person opened it for them.

Dressed in a dark blue security officer’s uniform, a massive black man looked down on them.

Easily half a foot taller than Don, and probably twice his weight in muscle alone, the man sized them up with stern dark eyes, and a grim expression. If that wasn’t intimidating enough, the man also had a bad burn scar running from this left cheek to his lower jaw.

Don stiffened, but Charles reached forwards to shake the man's hand. "Good to see you, sir." He turned to Don. "This is Bronson Knight, head of security and special trainer."

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“Don,” Knight greeted, shaking the younger man’s hand and nearly crushing it. “I’ll be giving you a tour of the facility. Follow me.”

Knight led them past the larger desk in the lobby, which had the name and logo of Zabel Pharmaceuticals, and took them back to the factory lines. Several workers were running the lines, producing nondescript generic pills for blood pressure, cough and cold symptoms and similar products. The offices were on the upper floors, giving a good view of the town in front of the facility. In the back were trucks being loaded with generic drugs to be delivered to wholesalers.

“Well, what do you think?” Knight asked Don.

“Well, it seems to be a smaller but well run operation,” Don began uncertainly. He really didn’t know enough about the business to make any better comments.

“But a little boring?” Charles asked, raising an

eyebrow. “Well…”

“That’s all right,” Charles assured him. “The generics are only to raise funds for the real research and development.” He turned to Knight, who folded his arms, and looked Don up and down again. “You’re sure, Charles?” the big man asked.

“Yes, Bronson. I’m sure. Show

him.” “All right. Come on.”

Knight led them down a long hallway to an elevator. Opening the door, the three got in and Don noted a locked panel below the regular floor buttons. Knight fished out a key and opened the panel, revealing another hidden basement floor that

the elevator serviced. This Knight pressed, and they all descended.

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The door opened, revealing another hallway, modestly lit, but colored bright white. An old, hairless man in a white lab coat emerged from one of the rooms. The man had an ugly, but sly and
intelligent face, along with dark eyes that matched Sheri's, only obscured by thick glasses. He smiled, and approached the trio.

"Ah, Charles. I see you've brought young Fowler." The man looked at Don, and noted the cross around his neck with a nod. "Excellent."

"Don, this is Alastair Zabel," Charles told him. "Founder of this company, Sherri's grandfather, and leader of the children of Enki."

"Nonsense. I'm no politician, only a scientist," Alastair replied, shaking Don's hand. "And scientists seek only to solve problems. In my case, the problem of the necromancer."

He paused, and looked at Charles again. "How much have
you told him?" "All but your project," Charles said.

"Ah. Well, I have for many years been conducting experiments with a substance I discovered in our homeland. The oil of a plant I call the Gilgamesh plant."

"Gilgamesh was the title character in an ancient Sumerian epic," Charles told Don. "Among other things, he sought immortality."

"Quite. In my younger days, I experimented with topical and oral extracts of it, hoping to increase human health and lifespan. Even in those early days, my closest friends and family were looking for a chance to leave the necromancer's fold. As time went on, I doubted her divinity more and more, and wondered if I

could create my own means to eternal life.”

“And did you?” Don asked quietly, wondering what he had really gotten himself into.

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“The short answer is no. As chemistry and medicine improved over the last few decades, I

isolated the active ingredient of Gilgamesh oil. Essentially, it’s just a derivative of growth hormone, not without its healing properties, but not possessing any miraculous effects on human physiology.”

He smiled, and Don felt a lump in the pit of his stomach. There was something in the old man’s face and tone that went down a path he didn’t think he would like.

“Then I hit on another idea. I found that using it on animals, one animal in particular, was where its true potential lay.”

He motioned towards a door on the left. Don and the others walked over. Alastair opened the door, and Don looked in.

He cried out in horror and dismay at the room’s occupants.

Two shaggy beasts hunkered in a corner. Both were headless, and only had a toothy mouth

where the neck should’ve been. Don instantly recognized the things from his nightmare the other night.

Don took a step backwards, but Charles grabbed him, and held him still. Don looked over his shoulder with dismay and a sense of betrayal. He had taken a chance on trusting this man he didn’t know, simply because he was a relative. What was he going to do to him?

The creatures stood, and began lumbering towards the group of people. They growled low in their throats and picked up speed. Don screamed and thrashed, but Charles held on.

Then Bronson stepped forward. Putting two fingers in his mouth, he whistled shrilly. The beasts stopped growling, and slowed down. They still approached, but far less threateningly and simply stood before them when they reached the doorway.

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“Let me go! What are those things?! Get me out of here!” Don raved, only nominally reassured by the things obeying Bronson’s command.

“Calm down, Fowler. You’re safe,” Alastair assured him. “They are the prowlers, beasts created by the necromancer to carry out tasks her spirits and human followers can’t. Usually mauling an opponent.”

Don thrashed again, and Charles shook his head. “Don, listen to us. We’re not here to kill you.

Don’t you think I’d have just shot you back in New York if I wanted you

dead?” “But...How…what...”

“Inana creates them using dark magic from the carcasses of animals,” Alastair explained. “Mostly dogs or wolves. Human flesh won’t respond to the spell. Once a prowler is made, it’s bound to Inana’s will, and exists only to kill and maim until it’s brought down.”

Alastair reached into his pocket. Pulling out a small revolver, he shot one of them in the chest.

It screamed, and fell over. The other one began to howl, but Bronson stepped forward, and put his hand on the thing’s shoulder. Making soothing noises at it, he calmed down the second prowler just as the first one died.

After a second, Don grimaced as a dark smelling odor came from the body. Then it began to collapse from inside, as though the bones had turned to liquid. Soon, it completely dissolved, leaving only a foul pile of hair and liquid in its wake.

“We can’t create them; we don’t have the magic,” Alastair said. “But Inana periodically sends packs of prowlers after us. Her priority is, of course, the tablet, but she would also destroy us for betraying and stealing from her.”

He looked down on the other prowler for a moment, and then shut the door. Next, he walked down the hall, and stopped at a glass window. The others followed, and Don peered in.

A surgical ward greeted his eyes. An operating table held an unconscious prowler, while white garbed human surgeons stood over it. The surgeon was making incisions in the base of the neck. Don, unable to look away, squinted and thought he saw something like brain tissue being exposed.

"The prowlers have killed some of us over the years," Alastair spoke up. "Including my son,

Ashera's father. At first, we merely hunted and killed them when they appeared, but then I hit on the idea of using them for my experiments."

He pointed to the operation taking place. "We tranquilized them at first to bring them in, and keep them docile. Then, as we examined and dissected them, we found that they still possess a rudimentary brain and spinal cord, albeit one with an overdeveloped aggression center. The operation you see now is removing that, and additional surgeries will reset and straighten their limbs, so that they will be somewhat taller."

He walked across the hall to another glass window. Don looked in, and saw a type of recovery room. About three or four prowlers were in hospital beds, hooked up to intravenous bags of some greenish liquid. Nurses walked around the room, checking vital signs. In another corner, another nurse was helping a prowler into a tub of similar looking liquid.

Alastair looked at Don. "The Gilgamesh solutions have a much stronger effect on prowler flesh than human. It helps them to not only recover from their

operations, but, well…”

He trailed off, and led them to the end of the hall. This part of the subterranean laboratory was a greenhouse, clearly the source of the plants. They walked in, and Don felt a blast of hot, moist air.

Thick rows of vines greeted him on either side, and overhead sprinklers sprayed a mist over everything.

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Bronson whistled again, and Don saw more prowlers emerge from the plant rows. He thought he wouldn't have become more astonished, frightened, or disgusted by them. He was wrong.

The prowlers he saw now had heads.

None of them had necks, but they all had bulges above the mouths that suggested the formation of a more traditional jaw than the toothed hole that normally served for a prowler's mouth. Some had only a bulge above the mouth, while others had nostril slits and small colorless eyes.

Some looked surprisingly human, having less hair than their fellows, but still more than the average man. Some of the eyes and noses looked decently proportioned, compared to some of the others. Three of the humanoid ones even wore trousers, and Don found himself reminded of the ugly state trooper guarding the entrance to the town.

He looked at Charles and Alastair. "The policeman?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

Alastair nodded. "Maskull is probably the most intelligent of the prowlers we have. He and a few others have learned to speak, and Bronson even taught him how to drive. Against my wishes."

Bronson shrugged. "I had a feeling about him. It worked out. We dressed him in a uniform, fitted up a car to look like it's a police vehicle, and he keeps the curious away."

One of the prowlers, with a face that had one normal sized eye, and one much smaller came up to Bronson. It reached up, and took the trainer's hand.

“Bronson…Knight…” it rasped.

Bronson patted its head. “Hello, Krag. Have you seen Nightspore?”

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The prowler, Krag, led Bronson by the hand through the vines. Don and the others followed to see another prowler sitting on a mat with its back to them. At the sound, it turned, and faced them, although it remained sitting.

This one had the thinnest coat of fur out of all of them. It also had a developed head and shoulder length black hair. Dressed in a hospital gown, Don surmised that it was a female, based on its rough shape and facial features. Indeed, it could almost pass for a very short person, except that it still had an abnormally wide, lipless mouth.

“Nightspore,” Krag greeted, and sat beside her. She smiled, revealing still sharp teeth, and patted his cheek. Don found himself amazed that these hideous things could show almost tender feelings, when they had been bred to be living weapons.

“How…how many are like this?” Don whispered.

“Almost thirty,” Alastair said. “The more we have, the easier it gets to capture them. Prowlers don’t attack their own kind, and the developed ones can subdue the more primitive ones, until it’s time to change them.”

“Why? Why are you doing this?” Don asked.

“As we’ve told you, we plan on making a stand against Inana here,” Alastair said. “We need every tool at our disposal. She can call forth spirits; that’s why I wanted your cross. She can create prowlers; that’s why I’ve made my own, better, smarter. She can even use telekinesis to shatter nonliving objects closer to her. So, when we issue a challenge to her, I plan to have snipers poised to shoot when she arrives in town. One way or another, when she comes here, she will die.”

Fowler said nothing, still not knowing what to say. Such bizarre sights and words had bombarded him over the last few days. He found himself beginning to regret ever agreeing to come here with Charles Beaumont. Cross or no cross, he didn't want to be part of this. He wanted to go home.

He felt that someone was looking at him, and looked up to see Nightspore studying him. She said nothing, and Don later learned that not all the prowlers developed vocal cords to speak. Yet she seemed aware of all around her, and her eyes, pale blue and very nearly human, seemed to convey thought. Thought that told him that there was no turning back. That he was a part of things here from now on.

Don looked back into her face, neither woman nor beast, but both and neither. He knew he still had to find a way.

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After taking his leave of them, Alastair escorted them back to the elevator. Once inside, Bronson addressed Don.

"You better get any idea of running out of your

head, kid." Don jumped, but kept his voice calm.

"Excuse me?"

Bronson snorted. "Don't play dumb. Before Zabel hired me, I was a drill sergeant in Vietnam. A couple years ago, I dealt with kids going into battle all the time. I got to recognize the ones who were

really scared and the ones who would try to bolt first chance they got."

“Look Don, we’re all scared,” Charles said soothingly, and gave Bronson a look. Bronson ignored the hint.

“Just remember, we’re in this together,” Bronson warned.

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They stepped out of the elevator. Bronson stayed behind as Charles and Don walked back to the Beaumont home. Dusk had fallen, and a cool wind had picked up. He and Charles made some small talk, but Don's heart wasn't in it. Truth be told, he still was going over scenarios in his head on how to get away.

Sherri greeted them at the door, telling them that she felt better, would probably go to work tomorrow, and that the elder Mrs. Beaumont had prepared dinner.

The dinner conversation was casual to the point of being maddening, and Don marveled at how they could be so calm, indeed, how he could even be sitting here at a normal dinner when monsters were being spawned just a mile away.

They asked him how his day had been, and what he thought of the company. He had replied that it had been very interesting. He omitted details, for while he could tell they all knew about them, they also seemed determined to enjoy whatever moments of normalcy remained before the inevitable reckoning.

Insane, Don thought. Why not just run, as all their ancestors purportedly did?

He wondered if he could wait until the night or wee hours of the morning, and maybe slip out. Maybe he could hitch a ride once he made the highway, provided he could avoid that Maskull creature. Maybe he could even get the car keys and steal the car. He wouldn't even care if he got caught by the police. He'd rather be in jail then here.

After dinner, Don stood, and stretched. "If you don't mind, I think I'll turn in for the night," he told them.

"I'll see you to your room," Charles said. "You sure you don't want a shower?"

“Maybe in the morning. Good night, Sherri. Everyone.”

He nodded and tried to walk as casually as he could to his room upstairs. Charles followed him, and shook his head before Don entered.

“You realize, Don, that none of us want to frighten you?” Charles asked. “We’re family. We care for each other.”

“Yes, of course,” Don smiled faintly. “Just say what you need from me.”

Charles studied his face. “Just be brave. Be brave and have faith. That’s all any of us can do, I

guess.”

Don nodded. “Good night, then.”

He walked in, and shut the door. He looked around at the simple furniture, and admitted that the bed looked tempting. Maybe he could catch a few hours sleep before…

He heard a very faint click behind him. Turning around, his eyes fell on the door. He then noticed something he hadn’t before. The lock was from the outside.

Don quickly reached out, and grabbed the doorknob. It

was locked. “Hey!” Don shouted. “What are you

doing?”

“I’m sorry,” Charles’ voice answered. “But Bronson’s right. You’re scared, Don. Scared enough to try something desperate.”

“Charles, let me out of here!”

“We’ve all worked too hard to let you risk upsetting our plans.”

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“This is

kidnapping!”

“This is

protection.”

“I don’t need your protection!” Don rattled the doorknob and pulled at the door, hoping it was old enough to be pried. It wasn’t.

“Charles,” he shouted again.

“I’ll get you in the morning. Good night.”

He heard Charles’ footsteps go downstairs. Don yelled again, pulling and kicking at the door. He stamped on the floor, and had the satisfaction of hearing the others shuffle their own feet downstairs.
Good. He’d keep them all up.

He looked wildly about the room, wondering if there was anything he could throw at the door or the window. Wait. The window. Maybe…

He calmed down enough to stop making noise. Walking quietly over to the window, he reached out, and tried the latch. To his immense relief, he felt that it wasn’t locked.

Don breathed a sigh of relief. So, he could escape after all. All he would have to do would be to wait and then jump out the window. It was on the second floor, but not so far that he wouldn’t risk a jump.

He was going to check the bed and closet to see if there was anything he could use to either make a rope or cushion, when something down on the lawn

caught his attention outside.

A prowler walked in the yard under his window. Even in the moonlight, Don could make out the ugly face of Krag. The creature looked up, folded his arms, and deliberately shook his head.

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Bronson must have sent him to keep watch over Don. He would not escape this night, not if that beast had anything to do with it.

Don shut the window, and sat on the bed. He put his hand in his head and tried not to start

crying.

VIII

The next morning, Charles met Bronson and Alastair in the basement room. They were gathered in the empty room where they had kept the regular prowler, the one who had only had its aggression center tampered with.

“Gentlemen, I think the time has come to issue our challenge,” Alastair said. “Fowler’s reluctance means we must hurry before he loses whatever nerve he does have.”

He pointed to the still headless prowler. “I don’t for sure know where the necromancer is right now. But in the mind of this creature, I believe it remembers where its mistress is. Bronson, please fetch Nightspore.”

Bronson nodded, and went to get the female prowler. A minute later, Nightspore stood before them, looking expectantly at the three men and the prowler. In her presence, the prowler stood at attention. Nightspore couldn’t speak, but her eyes and, they believed, her mind, could communicate with her fellows, and make them listen. Indeed, the other prowlers in the facility all tended to cluster around her, and to look up to her.

It was why Alastair wanted her present now.

“Charles, did you write out a manuscript?” Alastair

asked. “Yes.” Charles took out a piece of paper,

and began to read.

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“To Inana, former queen of Apsu, conqueror of the house of Enki, false goddess and necromancer, greeting.

“Your crimes against our families are too long to list. The number and names of your victims too many to recall. From your foul origins in ages past, through your alliance with Nergal, demon of sickness and death, to the present day, you have lurked in the shadows.

“You conquered, deceived, and oppressed us, the children of Enki. You have hounded the children of Atrahasis and Ninshabar, charging them with theft, even though your tablets, in turn, were stolen by you from places where no man was ever meant to go.

“Now we say no more. Know, false goddess, that the children of all your foes await you in Monstruwakan Valley, New York. We have the seventh tablet, we have our freedom, and we have our courage. Never again will we run from you. Come and claim what you wrongfully believe is yours, for in the end either you or us will quit the Earth at last.

Alastair Zabel, Charles Beaumont, and the rest await your answer.”

Alastair nodded, and looked at the two prowlers. Nightspore had been looking intently at the other, and when Charles had finished reading, turned her attention back to them.

Charles rolled up the note, and took a string out of his other pocket. This he used to tie up the letter. Finally, he held it to Nightspore, who took it and looked at Alastair questioningly.

“Give the note to the other prowler,” Alastair said. “Tell it we want it to return to where it came

from.”

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Nightspore stared long and hard at the other prowler, her look one of intense concentration.

After a minute, the other prowler reached out, and took the folded up note. Nightspore patted its shoulder with affection and something not unlike gratitude.

Satisfied, Alastair, Charles and Bronson led Nightspore and the other prowler to the elevator. They travelled up to the ground flood and the loading dock, where they watched the prowler lumber away.

“This still doesn’t seem to be the most practical way of contacting someone,” Bronson pointed out when the prowler disappeared into the field outside the factory, carrying the letter.

“It will work,” Alastair said. “It will have to. As for the other prowlers, will they be ready?” Bronson looked down at Nightspore. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Alastair frowned, not exactly liking Bronson’s tone. “Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s just,” Bronson bit his lip. “Sir, is this right? We’ve made a lot of progress with these prowlers. So much, in fact, that I…”

“What?” Alastair interrupted. “Mr. Knight, you’ve been paid, very well I might add, to train unique animals. If there’s a problem, tell me now.”

“Well, that’s just it. I’m not sure they are animals any more. They seem to think and feel. They can be taught to do things that people do. And not only Maskull. Look.”

He reached for Nightspore. She looked up at Bronson as he reached for her tunic. As he tried to put his hand on the top button to undo it, she pushed his hand

away, and shook her head.

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“Sorry,” he told her. Then he addressed Alastair again. “See? Modesty. The wish to dress as people do. To be given the same consideration as any human. Mr. Zabel, they didn’t ask to be part of this. What right have we to force them to fight?”

“Right? Mr. Knight, remember what these things are,” Alastair cautioned. “Monsters.

Abominations bred by an enemy who would see us all dead. All I’ve done is tamper with them so that they may be used against her. It’s no different than if I yanked a knife out of her hand and turned the blade back on her. What then? Will you tell me these things have souls now?”

He finished the last sentence with open disdain, and glared at Nightspore. Charles noted that the creature’s eyes looked down in shame. Bronson met Alastair’s gaze with his own hard look.

“Yes. I do believe that,” he said quietly.

Charles looked from one man to the other. For a moment, neither said a word. Although each seemed to be daring the other to speak. Finally, Alastair pointed a thumb behind him.

“I don’t have time to argue, Mr. Knight. I have to check on another part of the factory. I would ask you again to remember that these are animals. You have been paid to train and care for animals. Unless of course, you resign?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Good. Then get back underground and see that they are fed and exercised. It could now come at any time.”

He turned on a heel and stiffly left. Bronson went back to the elevator, Nightspore following in his wake. Charles, for his part, decided to follow Bronson.

“What was that all about?” he asked the trainer.

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“You really want to know?” Bronson asked, hitting a button on the elevator.

“Yes, I would,” Charles said. “You were so hard on Fowler, yet have compassion for these prowlers.”

They descended back into the underground labs and walked out of the elevator towards the greenhouse.

“Your cousin’s different,” Bronson said. “He voluntarily came here. But the prowlers had no choice. They’ve never had a choice. I don’t know, maybe I’ve gotten where I’m just down on people.” When they entered the greenhouse, Nightspore joined some of the other prowlers.

“I grew up in a place called Oakwood, Indiana,” Bronson told Charles.

“Ever hear of it?” “Sorry, no.”

“Most people haven’t. It’s largely farmland, but there’s a small liberal arts college there. Anyway, I grew up on a farm, training horses and dogs. I was fairly happy, and learned a lot about respect for life.

“Then I got drafted, and a lot of that respect went away. I was told to train guys to fight and kill. Indeed, I fought and killed. I did, and still do, hate cowardice.” “And?” Charles asked when he paused.

“And then I got burned in a jungle fire. Burned badly enough that they sent me home. And when I first stepped off the plane in Louisville, a bunch of hippies

were protesting there. Calling us things like baby killers, monsters, and what not. I'd done my job, and that was the reward."

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Bronson snorted, and went over to a box. It contained meat, cooked meat, Charles noted. This he began to pass out to the prowlers nearby before continuing.

“I was pretty disillusioned with people then. I remember getting on a bus back from Louisville to Oakwood. The driver, an old World War II vet assured me that they were cowards and that I was a real hero. Only, I didn’t feel like one. I didn’t know what I felt. I only knew that I wanted to go home, and be with the animals. Their company I preferred to the people I met.”

“That’s why you have more sympathy to the prowlers than Don, I suppose,” Charles said. “Especially working with them versus people.”

The prowlers continued to pass the meat around, ensuring that all received a share. Then, to Beaumont’s surprise, they didn’t start tearing into it. Instead, they looked expectantly at Knight, who bowed his head and said the Lord’s Prayer out loud. The prowlers lowered their heads, and some of them even mouthed their own response, although they didn’t speak.

“Alastair Zabel found me, and hired me for this job,” Bronson continued. “At first, I couldn’t believe such creatures existed, and I treated them as such. But then, they began to change, and become more human.”

Bronson looked up. “I’ve learned what we’re up against. What’s at stake. Well, as you know, I do my duty. But these here, they have a right to live. They deserve more than to be seen as weapons.”

Charles nodded slowly. He thought about his cousin again. While Don had agreed to come here, he was not being allowed to leave. Nor would he let the younger man leave now; they needed the cross. Still, he felt that Don too deserved

better, and turned to go.

“I’m heading home. Good day, Bronson.”

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“Charles,” Bronson grunted. He sat down, and pulled out a small Gideon bible from his pocket. The prowlers gathered around as he began to read. Charles watched for a minute, and then turned to go. The last thing he heard was the opening of the 23rd Psalm.

“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want…”

IX

Don heard the door unlock, and tensed for what was ahead. He saw Charles come in, carrying a tray with two burgers, drinks and a book. He saw that the latter was the *Cult of the Inverted Kingdom* manuscript.

“Does the jailer eat with the prisoner?” Don asked.

Charles flinched, and put the tray down. “I’m sorry about this, Don. I promise when this is over we will let you go on your way. But we need you.”

“You mean you need this,” Don retorted, holding the cross from where it hung about his neck. “I tried to just give it to you.”

“That should show you that I value you, not just what you have.” Charles sat down, prayed, and picked up a burger. Don hesitantly followed suit, figuring that if nothing else, his cousin would never poison him.

Charles thumbed through the book as they ate, looking through both the Latin and some of his notes in the margin. Then he found the page he was looking for.

“This book tells us a lot of history of our family, as they protected the tablet,” Charles told Don. “This page, however, also tells of the cross of Roland de

Beaumont. In particular, it speaks of how to use

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it for exorcism. I want to teach it to you. When the necromancer does come, she will be able to send spirits after us. You, with the cross, can protect yourself as well as us."

"Even assuming I'm willing, what makes you think I'm able?" Don asked.

"Well, first you must give yourself to Jesus Christ, Son of God," Charles said. "God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit created the world and man. Man was to obey God, to love the Lord and love their fellows, or perish. But man disobeyed, and fell into sin. Inana is one result of that, but in reality, all have sinned.

"But God sent the Son as Jesus to perish for us. That way, if we repent of our sins, if we ask Jesus to be our Savior, not just believe he is, but actively join him, then we can be with Him in the world to come."

He pointed to the page in the book. "Here is the exorcism. The Lord Jesus will help you here

too."

He read through the page, and Don listened, chewing his food thoughtfully. He knew that his cousin meant well, but still resented being locked in this room.

"I'll think about it?" Don said. "But, I'm still a prisoner, aren't I?"

"Don..." Charles sighed. He stood and left the book on the bed. "Look. I won't force you to do or believe anything you don't want to do. But I still can't allow you to leave just yet. Remember, Inana is still out there."

He looked at Don one last time, and then left, locking the door

behind him. "Yeah," Don muttered. "Everyone's sorry."

Back in New York, Curtis Zabel walked through the lobby of Zabel Security Systems. The company was both the family business, and where most of his people, the Children of Tammuz, lived. They offered security services and private investigation to clients along the entire East Coast, and were well spread out despite the relatively small size.

Of course, their main objective was to find the Children of Enki, and the family of Atrahasis, enemies of their queen and goddess.

He clutched a note in his hand as he walked past the reception desk to the elevator. It was late, and no one else was around. Most everyone else was on duty or asleep in the residential areas above the business levels. But a prowler had arrived, coming into the secret pens in the basement via the tunnel that only they knew about. It had handed the trainer the note that had in turn been given to Curtis.

He entered the elevator, and hit the top floor button. He swallowed nervously as the elevator ascended to the rooms of their mistress. Very rarely did he or anyone else see the necromancer these days. Ever since coming to America, more and more mundane duties had been assigned to others, while she stayed sealed away, exercising, meditating, or communing with Nergal, the demon lord of them all.

The door opened, and he stepped out into a dimly lit room. He looked around, and saw books, ancient statues, and an oil painting of the necromancer as she had been long ago on another continent. Of her, he saw nothing. She must be in one of the rooms further back, but he hesitated walking too far into her inner

sanctum. Would she be displeased? Would he see something no human should ever see?

He felt a faint chill behind him, and whirled around. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a shadow move. He swallowed, half expecting his throat to begin constricting with sickness any

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moment. Briefly, he wondered if he should just leave the note somewhere prominent in the room and leave.

A footstep sounded, and he turned around. In a doorway, Inana herself stood. Tall, imposing, of indeterminate age, and with terrible black eyes, the necromancer still inspired fear and awe whenever she did appear before her followers. He bowed, and held up the piece of paper.

“My queen, news of your enemies,” he said.

Inana didn’t immediately reply, but did step forward and take the note. She read it silently, and then crushed it in her hand. Throwing it down, she finally addressed Curtis.

“Where did this come from?” she demanded quietly.

“One of the prowlers we sent out returned with it,” he told her.

For a moment, she didn’t speak. Then, she turned around and walked back the way she came. “Get a van ready,” she instructed, not turning around.

“Prowlers only. You will drive me to Monstruwakan Valley, but first, I must send my own message.”

“Donald?”

Don thought he heard someone calling his name. But in the middle state between sleep and wakefulness, he couldn’t be sure, so he didn’t bother opening his eyes.

“Donald?” The voice called again, and it sounded familiar. Slowly, he opened his eyes, and sat

up.

At the foot of the bed, he saw his mother.

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Not gaunt and trying to hide sickness as she had at the end, but healthy and happy as she had been about a year ago. Her blue eyes and silver hair shone with vitality, and she was dressed as impeccably as she had been in life.

For the faint shimmer around her outline confirmed that he wasn't dreaming, but rather seeing a ghost.

"Mother?" he asked when he found his voice. He felt a flash of fear and shock, but also wonder. Here, sitting at the foot of his bed, was irrefutable proof of life beyond the grave. His doubts immediately faded, now more ghost than the spirit before him.

Joellen smiled tenderly at him, and held out her arms. "My dear son."

Don reached out, and hesitantly embraced her. While noncorporeal, he felt a sensation of warmth as he touched the apparition.

"Mother. I've missed you and dad," he said. "Is he here, too?"

"No. He has gone beyond," Joellen told him. "But I had to come back to you, Donald." "Mother, I'm trapped here," he told her.

"I know."

He shook his head, and looked at her. "I don't know what to do. These people…they've done things, made things…" He trailed off. "I just want to get away from here. They want to fight Inana, the necromancer. It's all true, isn't it?"

Joellen's smile subtly changed, becoming more forced, but Don didn't notice. "Oh yes, Don."

“Can you…can you help me leave?”

Joellen laughed, and hugged him again. “My dear Donald. It’s too late for that.”

As she hugged him, Don felt the warmth dissipate from her form. However, as she grew colder, she also seemed to become more solid, and her grip tightened.

“What?” Don began, but he never finished. Her hand seized him by the hair, and pulled his head so that his face looked into hers. Don did, and then screamed.

All her beauty and kindness had left. Instead, her skin had turned ashen gray, and was even flaking away from bone in parts. Her eyes had sunken into the sockets until he could only see a faint red light in the now skull like face. What little hair was left were only dry cracked wisps, and her mouth and tongue were a sickly black.

The figure, not his mother at all, stood, grabbed him with a superhuman strength, and threw him against the far wall. He slammed into it, and fell to the ground with a thud, crying out in searing pain and terror.

“You would try your hand against ours?” the figure demanded, no longer even sounding like Joellen Fowler. “You, whose fathers have fled and fallen time and time again?”

He tried to scream again, but only retched. His throat felt hot and congested, and his head began to swim. He didn’t know if it would be better to pass out, and no longer see what was before him, or if he should fight to stay awake lest he never woke up again.

“We are forever!” the spirit shrieked at him. “We will triumph!”

He decided, scared and hurting as he was that he dare not lose consciousness. His hands fumbled for the dresser next to him, and he tried to grab it, to stand up. But a wave of nausea hit him again, and he only managed to jostle the furniture while he fought against throwing up.

Something fell off the top, and into his lap. He looked down, and saw the cross. His hand touched it, and the sickness in his throat began to lessen.

He heard a crash, and saw Charles, Sherri, and Krag slam the door open and rush into the room.

At the sight which greeted them, the humans gasped and the prowler growled.

The spirit frantically looked back and forth between them. It snarled back at the prowler, but seemed to become more opaque in appearance. “He cannot use it!” it said, referring to Don.

“I can,” Charles answered. He began to chant in an ancient language, the language that the exorcism spell had been originally written in. Don felt the cross get warmer in his hand. He instinctively gripped it, and felt something he had never felt before. Or perhaps it was someone.

If you’re there, Lord, he thought. Then please help me now.

He felt strength returning, and staggered to his feet. Charles, and now Sherri were chanting the exorcism, and he joined in. He brandished the cross at the shadowy figure, which wailed one more time, and then, losing its form, fled through the wall.

Don felt an enormous weight come off him, and he staggered forward, as though relieved from an unseen grip. Krag jumped back, and Sherri caught him. His vision swam, and then finally cleared.

“What? What?” he gasped, suddenly short of breath. Charles and Sherri sat him back down on the bed.

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“It would seem you’ve performed your first exorcism,”

Charles told him. Don looked up at him questioningly, and

Charles met his gaze.

“Now do you believe?”

“Yes.”

Charles nodded, and addressed Krag. “Go tell your master that our challenge has been accepted.”

X

A black van made its way down the road towards the sign pointing to Monstruwakan Valley. As he had done before, the prowler, Maskull, posing as a state trooper, turned on his lights and followed in his police car until the van pulled over.

Getting out, Maskull approached the van, noting the tinted windows and lack of a license plate.

But that wasn’t all. Somehow, this stop felt different, vaguely familiar, although he couldn’t say why. Something touched his mind, the vague notions of fear, anger and hunger that he only half remembered before the time at Zabel Pharmaceuticals.

The window rolled down, and Maskull saw a nondescript man at the wheel. In the passengers’ seat, sat a powerful, dark haired and dark eyed woman dressed in a hooded robe. Maskull stiffened; he knew this woman. Somewhere, somehow, he felt that he had once considered her important, of her word being his only law. Yes, he had been told to hunt, and to kill.

A faint snarl curled his lips, and he felt the old anger return. Yes, he thought.

Kill. Kill her enemies...

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He shook his head, and fell back onto his old familiar lines. “Do you know why I pulled you over?” he began.

The woman then turned, and looked at him full in the face. The words died on his lips as he remembered at last. Inana. The necromancer. Ally of Nergal.

His maker.

She seemed to sense it too, for expression was one of

bewilderment. “You’re…you’re a prowler,” she said, disbelief in

her voice.

He didn’t answer, and he felt her thoughts in his own head. Thoughts that said he belonged to her. Thoughts that demanded obedience, especially when it came to attacking those who would dare oppose her.

But other thoughts entered his mind as well. Thoughts of Charles Beaumont, who had treated him with kindness. Thoughts of Bronson Knight, who more than any of the others had treated him like a person, who had tried to teach him…

Kill, the thought entered again. Kill all who oppose the necromancer. She is to be obeyed. She is to be worshipped.

He screamed, and grabbed his head, knocking his hat off. Underneath, was a small uneven lump of a head with misshapen ears and unkempt hair. He tried to hold onto better thoughts. Thoughts of Nightspore, Krag, and the others sitting with him in the garden. Bronson had read from his bible to them.

Our Father, who art in heaven…

The pressure increased, and Maskull screamed once again. Then, he fell to the ground, and lost consciousness. The driver and Inana got out of the car, and looked down on the fallen prowler.

Reaching down, Inana removed the sunglasses, discovering that Maskull indeed had

eyes. “Extraordinary,” Inana said out loud. “What have they done to you?”

“My queen, what now?” her driver, Curtis, asked. “If Alastair had more of these, it complicates things. Should we send for more help?”

Inana frowned at him. “No,” she replied. “Do you doubt my own strength?”

Ever since that fateful night in France, so many years ago, there had been too many in her fold who had doubted. Many had left with Alastair, but even among her loyal subjects, they served her with fear, but less reverence than her past followers had.

So she had made it clear that she would seek out and destroy Alastair on her own. With only a few of her own prowlers to help. And if she recovered the seventh tablet as well, so much the better.

Curtis bowed his head. “Forgive me, my queen. I meant no disrespect.”

Inana nodded once and opened the back door of her van. About ten normal prowlers crouched there, growling, drooling, waiting for something or someone to maul. She mentally directed them to pick up the unconscious, mutated prowler, and to carry him onto the truck.

“We will determine how they made the prowler what it is now,” Inana told Curtis. She turned around, and got back into the van. “But now, we have other matters to attend to. Take us to the factory. They will all be there.”

“As you wish,” he replied. He shut the door after the prowlers retrieved Maskull. The prowlers sniffed and pawed at him, uncertain what to make of the form, neither prowler nor man. Then he

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climbed back into the driver's seat, and continued down the road. Only the police car with its still flashing lights remained.

On the second floor of Zabel Pharmaceuticals, Don sat with Charles, Sherri and Alastair at the boardroom table. An open window showed him the grey cool outside. It was going to be a dismal, windy day, and the weather did nothing to raise his spirits.

Don had prayed to God last night. He had completely, unequivocally asked Christ to be his Savior now. He was fully committed, for better or for worse.

They all had said very little to one another; really there wasn't much to say. Instead, they had been watching the road, nervously waiting for Inana's arrival. The houses on either side of the road were locked and Don imagined the families there huddling together in fear.

Alastair had cancelled all work today, and the only other people in the building now were Bronson Knight, the prowlers, and about half a dozen snipers on the roof. Alastair had hoped that he could destroy their enemy with a minimal loss of life. If they failed, then he hoped the necromancer wouldn't bother with any of the other children of Enki as long as they didn't interfere.

Sherri stood up, and pointed. The others got to their feet, and looked outside. A large black van quickly drove to the building's empty parking lot. It stopped, and while the windows were tinted, they had no doubt who was looking at the place.

"Charles, if I may?" Alastair spoke up.

Charles bent down, and picked up his lockbox from where it had been resting at his feet. He opened it, and handed the seventh tablet to the older man. He nodded, walked over to the window, and held up the tablet so that the people in the van could easily see it.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the van doors opened, and a man and a woman got out. The woman was dressed in a hooded robe, but the wind blew the hood back to reveal a dark haired, dark eyed woman of uncertain age. She looked up at Alastair, and her brow furrowed with a look of rage.

It had been sixty or so years since that ill fated movie had been filmed. Yet Don could see it was the same 'actress'. She hadn't aged a day, but the hatred in her eyes had only grown stronger.

She pointed at the window, and Don heard a faint cracking sound.

"Get behind the desk," Alastair shouted, running away from the window himself. They all ducked behind as the window cracked, and then shattered violently, as if an invisible wrecking ball had just smashed through.

"I thought she would try that," Alastair told his stunned companions. He put the tablet back in the box, sealed it, and handed it back to Charles.

"You, Sherri, and Don head for the roof," he told them. "Alert the snipers. Don, keep your cross ready in case she tries to summon a spirit. I'll meet Knight downstairs."

They stood, and Alastair clasped each one of their hands in turn. "Thank you," he said.

Then they all ran down the hall. Alastair took the elevator down while the others took the stairs

up.

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Inana watched the building for a moment. She took a step forward.

And had to run behind her vehicle as a series of gunshots rang out. She cried out with surprise and anger as bullets hit the van door. She heard a scream, and spared a look through the front to the other side of the van.

Curtis was bleeding, and clutching his shoulder. But he still thought clearly, and pulled out a pistol. He quickly turned back, and fired a few shots at the roof. Inana looked over her shoulder as she tried to see the roof. She saw men shooting there, and thought she saw one of the men fall. She smiled grimly. Excellent.

Running to the back of the van, she threw open the doors, and let out her prowlers.

Don, Sherri, and Charles opened the door to the roof to see that the snipers were already shooting. One of them glanced over his shoulder.

“Get down!” he hollered. They did, and not a moment too soon. Someone was returning fire from the van.

Don cried out as he saw a bullet hit one of the snipers in the head. The man crumpled to the ground, and Don saw the life fade from the blood stained face.

He screamed again, but Charles grimly grabbed the man’s gun, and began to shoot down at the van himself.

“He’s…he’s,” Don sputtered.

“No time for that,” Charles replied, without turning around. “Can you shoot?”

“What? No!”

“Something else you’ll need to learn,” Charles replied.

On the ground, they saw Inana emerge from the back of the van with several prowlers in her wake. The group ran towards the front door. Charles and the other snipers began shooting down, and a prowler jumped up to protect its mistress. A bullet found it, and it roared, writhed on the ground for a few minutes, and then died.

Even at this distance, Don could see that the prowler’s body began to smoke and then melt away into a filthy pile of hair and ooze. He watched, fascinated and frightened as another prowler was hit, and suffered the same fate.

Then, Inana and her charges made it inside. Soon, they would be coming for them.

Bronson Knight watched the skirmish outside, his mouth set in a grim line. Although not near as large a battlefield as Vietnam, he felt as if the war he had served a tour of duty in, the war that was still going on, had now followed him back here. No matter where he turned, it seemed, evil forces sought to spread death and chaos.

He remembered the protestors who had ‘welcomed’ him home. Remembered their accusations of baby killer. Well, not this time. He wouldn’t put his charges in harm’s way unless he had to and he would fight by their side.

He glanced down. Krag, Nightspore, and a few others stood watching. Then they all looked at him, expectantly, waiting for orders.

“You go for the other prowlers,” he told them. “Maybe they won’t even attack you. I don’t know. But leave the necromancer to me.”

Inana kicked open the door and ran in with the other prowlers into the wide open lobby.

Bronson stepped forward, and whistled shrilly.

Inana whirled around to face him, as the mutated prowlers ran forth to meet the original ones. At first, Inana’s prowlers growled, and ran forth too. But then, they stopped. Although still tensed up for a fight, they seemed confused, and began to circle their opponents, not sure what to do. They never attacked their own kind, but didn’t know if their current foes counted or not.

Inana momentarily turned her attention from Bronson, and seemed to concentrate on her prowlers. Some of them attacked the newer prowlers, but then Nightspore stepped forward.

She couldn’t speak, but looked intently at some of the advancing beasts. They stopped again, and hesitated, feeling another will trying to command them, to soothe them, to assure them that violence wouldn’t be necessary here.

Kill, Inana thought in their direction. Kill, kill, kill!

Her prowlers ran back and forth, some of them attacking, others holding back. One ran up to Nightspore, ready to bite her, but Krag stepped forward, and knocked it back.

“Hey!”

Bronson shouted at the necromancer. She turned back to him as he slammed

into her, tackling her to the ground. Inana roared herself, and they wrestled on the ground for a few minutes. Bronson reached behind her, and tried to pull her arm back, the one he had seen her gesture with. If he could break it…

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Inana stood, and threw him off. He slammed into the back of one of her prowlers, who turned around, and bit him in the shoulder. He screamed, and one of his prowlers tackled the first prowler, and beat it to death.

As Inana's prowler dissolved, Bronson stood, and faced the necromancer. Never had he felt such strength. Never had he seen such hate.

The hippies had accused him of being a killer of women and children. But what he faced now, he told himself, was no woman. It was a monster. Atheists believed that people were just another species of animal. And without God, so they were.

The good in them atrophied so that they sought happiness in worldly goals rather than God, and grew angrier and angrier when their efforts turned up empty. Later, more goodness would be lost, leaving them mere slaves to lust and aggression, fighting tooth and nail. And the necromancer had had millennia to atrophy spiritually. True, she could still appear charming and intelligent. But such things were only weapons now to use when it suited her in the fight against her enemies.

Bronson balled up his fists, and charged her, as prowlers fought around them. He punched at her, but she caught his fist in both of his hands, and squeezed. He felt bones break, but fought against the pain, and brought his other fist into her face, smashing her nose.

She dropped his hand, and backed away, staggering. Bronson noted with satisfaction that blood ran down her face, and her eyes were watering. Unfortunately, his own were too, as searing pain gave way to numbness and he knew his hand would probably never recover from where she had crushed it with

her bare hand.

He punched at her again, and she slashed back with her nails. They exchanged a few more blows, but Bronson was finding it hard to fight with only one hand. Soon, Inana had pushed him to the

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ground. Straddling him, she dug her nails into his face, trying to get at his eyes. He fought back, but couldn't dislodge her.

"Bronson Knight!"

He heard Krag's voice, and saw a dark shape jump on her head, now trying to claw her eyes out.

Inana let Bronson go, and reached up to pry Krag from her head.

The trainer kicked himself loose, and tried to get to his feet. Then, to his horror, he saw Inana stand, holding a struggling Krag.

Lifting him high, Inana threw him against a far wall with such force that he heard a sickening crunch. Then, before he could react, she aimed a kick at his head. He heard another crunch, and felt himself flying into a corner by the force.

From a door at the end of the lobby, Alastair saw Inana take out Krag and Bronson. He had hoped that killing Inana would have proven easier than this, but he supposed that he should've known better.

Prowlers continued to fight one another, and he saw Nightspore take the lead among his side.

Silently, through means he never had fully understood, she regrouped her fellows and led them on a charge against Inana's remaining prowlers. They crashed together, tearing and clawing at one another. Inana seemed to sense that the most human like of these prowlers was also the most dangerous and she ran towards Nightspore, aiming a kick at her head. The prowler ducked, and she sent two more at the necromancer. She batted them aside and dove for Nightspore.

After a struggle, Alastair saw that Inana had her hands around the female prowler's rudimentary neck. Nightspore thrashed and fought, but the necromancer was stronger, and managed finally to choke her to death.

Alastair cursed under his breath. Bronson hadn't wanted them to be thrown away like this, and Alastair hadn't listened. He had seen them as disposable, just a way of turning Inana's own forces against her. Now, he saw that the trainer had been right.

He had watched them fight and die side by side. And while they had still been animals, something about them had been trying to be more. Had they somehow acquired souls after all? They bled with the red blood of men, and unlike other prowlers, didn't dissolve upon death. If they had souls, then he had indeed only given Inana more victims.

No, he thought. No more victims today.

He stepped out, and Inana stood from the fallen Nightspore to face him.

"You," she said, wiping blood from her face with her sleeve and scowling at him.

"I had hoped never to see you again, Inana," Alastair said. He looked her up and down, and

smiled thinly. "Ironic. Once I worshipped you. Once I believed in all the old pagan gods. But you bleed as any human does. I'm not surprised. I've long recognized you for what you are."

"And that is?"

"A pretender. One who has the blood of countless lives on her hands. Beginning with my forefather, Enki."

“Enki was a swine!”

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“But he never joined forces with demons and fed the souls of humans to them.” “You will die, Alastair Zabel,” Inana hissed.

“Then, I’ll take my tablet back at last.”

Alastair pressed a button on the wall. The sprinklers started, covering them and the bodies between them with clear liquid. At first, Inana was confused, but then her eyes widened when she smelled it.

Gasoline.

Alastair pulled out a lighter. He was old, he reflected, and knew he wouldn’t have lived many more years anyway. But with this, his last act, he could ensure that his granddaughter would have life outside all of this.

Inana, panicked, ran from the door, as Alastair lit the lighter.

On the roof, an explosion rocked the building, knocking Charles and the other snipers to their feet. They had been watching the outside for any sign of life from the building. The man who had driven Inana had apparently run out of bullets and had been hiding in the van.

Don, Charles, Sherri and the others struggled to their feet, and looked over the edge. The ground floor had erupted with fire, and they saw the cloaked figure of Inana leap away from the blaze.

Her cloak was on fire, but she quickly shed it, and frantically rolled on the ground. Underneath, she wore a black jumpsuit. Don squinted and could see that while she had been bleeding from her nose, and suffered blisters, she would probably

be all right.

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Inside the van, Curtis looked up. When he saw his mistress, he started the engine to start driving towards her. He figured he could use the van itself to fend off the sniper's bullets.

Unnoticed and forgotten in the chaos, Maskull slowly came to. Groggily, he lifted his head and looked around, trying to figure out where he was. When he realized that he was inside a van and remembered the moments leading up to his blackout, he turned around.

He saw the driver in the seat steering the vehicle forward. Thorough the window, Maskull saw the front of the building he called home burning. He saw Inana, hurt, but alive and getting to her feet. He didn't understand what was happening, but he thought one thing.

He would never serve her again.

He snarled, and ran for the driver's seat. Curtis turned and tried to bat away the prowler, but Maskull reached out and grabbed the wheel.

"I am not yours!" Maskull yelled at Inana.

Curtis wrestled him from the wheel. Maskull tried to steer it in Inana's direction, and run her over, but she ran out of the way as the driver wrestled the wheel out of his hand.

Maskull bent down and bit the man's hand, and they both lost control of the van. It slammed into the building's front door and into the blaze.

Behind her, Inana heard sirens. She turned around, and saw police and fire

trucks in the distance. She cursed under her breath. While she had had her revenge on Alastair Zabel, her other enemies were trapped on the roof. The fire separated them from her, and it was clear she would once again fail to regain the seventh tablet.

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Unless…

She closed her eyes, stretched out her hands, and began to chant. She would call forth one of the spirits allied with her, one that would cause sickness and death. She would strike them down, and then the spirit could tell her where the tablet had been hidden.

She recited a summons in her native pre-Sumerian language. In the sky above her, a dark cloud took shape. She pointed to the roof of the building, turned, and ran into the fields that surrounded the factory, disappearing into the tall grass.

“What is that?” Don asked as they watched Inana conjure up a dark shape on the ground and then run away. He really didn’t have to ask; the shape took on a man like shape and they all felt their throats tightening and their vision swimming once again.

Charles looked at him. “Don, the cross! Hurry!”

Don pulled the cross off his neck, and held it up. If ever he needed the help of God himself, now would be the time. He and Charles began to recite the exorcism spell.

But the results weren’t the same as they were before. The spirit lunged towards them, fierce, angry, and ready to destroy them all. The snipers were knocked to their backs and it directed its attention on Sherri, Charles, and himself.

A presence entered Don’s mind, and he clutched his head with one hand. With the other, he

tried to hold up the cross, but his strength was wavering. He knew that a simple

exorcism wouldn’t be enough against this stronger spirit.

He would need to break its will.

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The most terrible power of the cross, he wasn't sure if it had ever been done. He certainly hadn't, and if he was to do it now, he would need Christ Himself working through him. He closed his eyes, muttered a quick prayer, and held the cross high.

Strength returned to his body, and he stood. He began to recite words he hadn't even known, and realized the Spirit of God was with him. He surrendered to it, and proceeded with wielding the
cross' power.

The spirit wavered, and its form seemed to split apart. A howling wind coursed through the sky, blowing away bits of darkness. Finally, the remnant of the spirit let out a wail that mingled with the wind, and was gone.

He collapsed to his knees, and bowed his head in silent prayer, thanking God for the help.
Below him, he heard the police and fire departments arrive and began trying to put out the fire on the ground floor.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. Opening his eyes, he stood and turned to face Charles and Sherri. Gratitude mingled with admiration shone in their faces, and Don nodded. No one had to say anything. It was clear now.

Just as Charles was protector of the tablet, so Don would be keeper of the cross. He had found his purpose. And his fate.

A ladder extended from a fire truck to let them and the snipers down. Don surveyed the wrecked first floor of the factory and said a prayer, both for those who had died, and for those still living.

Epilogue

Don, Charles, and Sherri were in the driveway of the Beaumont house. They had finished packing their things and then would be returning to New York. There, Don would use part of his parents' money to buy out his lease, gather his few belongings, and then depart the east coast forever.

In the weeks since the failed attempt to kill Inana, the survivors had buried Alastair, Bronson, the prowlers, and others who had died. A period of mourning had followed, and then there was the matter of deciding what to do now.

Some of the children of Enki had made preparations to move away, in hopes of avoiding any attempt at retaliation by the necromancer.

Others wanted to stay, reasoning that they had already built lives here, and that as long as the tablet and cross were taken away, Inana wouldn't bother returning to Monstruwakan Valley.

Don looked down the road while Charles and Sherri hugged his parents and brother goodbye. Scaffolding surrounded Zabel Pharmaceuticals as construction workers gutted and prepared to repair the building. Costly of course, but the steady supply of income from generic drugs did make recovery possible.

They got in the car, and Charles started the engine. Charles had decided to check out the small town Bronson had told him about. One Oakwood, Indiana. Looking into it, they discovered that Charles could get a teaching job at the small college there, and Don could begin taking classes in theology.

He had decided to become a minister. Now that he was a Christian, with a unique calling, he realized that he needed to learn about God. As much as he could. He

also needed to do good. As much as he could.

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The car pulled out of the driveway. Where the road would ultimately take them, time would

tell.

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